













LOS ANGELES ART COMMUNITY: GROUP PORTRAIT

Hans Burkhardt

Interviewed by Susan Einstein

Completed under the auspices  
of the  
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#### LOS ANGELES ART COMMUNITY: GROUP PORTRAIT

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## INTRODUCTION

Hans Burkhardt was born December 20, 1904, in Basel, Switzerland, to Gustav and Anna Schmidt Burkhardt. His father, a cabinetmaker, left for America in 1907 with the intention of having his family follow as soon as he was settled. But when Hans's mother died in 1910, he and his two sisters were placed in an orphanage; and when, soon thereafter, his father sought to send for his children, the Basel Authorities refused to grant them leave.

During his childhood at the orphanage, Hans showed an early interest in art and drawing. He frequently visited the museum in Basel; his favorite painters were Arnold Boeklin and Ferdinand Hodler. He taught himself to paint by copying postcard reproductions of the masters.

At age fifteen Hans was apprenticed to a gardener, and for three years he learned the trade. He then took a job in a large nursery, but he soon became disgusted with the harsh life of long hours and little pay, and so he wrote his father, asking to come to America. His father made the necessary arrangements, and in November 1924, Hans arrived in New York and, for what seemed to him the first time, began to enjoy a comfortable existence. He soon secured a job in the decorating department of the furniture factory where his father was foreman. At night and on Saturdays he attended Cooper Union, where he studied period furniture decoration.



Unable to take a life class at Cooper Union, he went to the Grand Central School of Art, and there he encountered the great surrealist precursor of the New York School, Arshile Gorky. Between 1928 and 1936 he studied privately with Gorky (one of his fellow students was Willem de Kooning) and indeed contributed substantially to Gorky's livelihood through discreet purchases of the master's works. In the process he gathered one of the country's finest collections of early and middle Gorky drawings and paintings.

Following the deaths of both his father and stepmother and a dark period in his own domestic life, Burkhardt resolved to leave New York, and in 1937 he established himself in Los Angeles. Working in a furniture establishment and subsequently in war plants, he managed always to leave some time for the continuing evolution of his own art.

The paintings and etchings from Burkhardt's mature period constitute an incredibly prolific and variegated output. Burkhardt was one of the first artists in Southern California to work in a predominantly abstract mode. Indeed, in many ways he brought to Los Angeles the kind of expressionist art which on the East Coast would evolve into the New York School in the late forties and fifties. To these creative tendencies he melded a strong sympathy with the nearby Mexican traditions (he has spent much time



in Mexico since the early fifties) and a taste for sociopolitical commentary (the foils for his passionate outrage have ranged from war and nuclear proliferation to art museum practices and smoking). Citing the frequently political complexion of his work, he has boasted that in some ways he is "the most American painter." When not political, his work is often sensitively lyrical, but it is at all times marked by a bold brushstroke. Burkhardt's later career was considerably touched by his friendship with the late American painter Mark Tobey.

Burkhardt has enjoyed consistent success in galleries and museums alike. He has shown at the Stendahl, Kantor, Circle, Robles, and Ankrum galleries, to name just a few, and has been the subject of substantial retrospectives at the Pasadena (1957), Santa Barbara (1961), Los Angeles Municipal (1962), San Diego (1966), and Long Beach (1972) museums, and at the Palace of the Legion of Honor, San Francisco (1961). In addition he has shown twice in Mexico at the Instituto Allende in San Miguel de Allende. For many years he regularly secured prizes at the Los Angeles County Museum annuals, and in 1974 he was one of nine senior Southern California painters honored in an exhibition at the Los Angeles Institute of Contemporary Art.

As an art teacher, Burkhardt has influenced several



generations of Southern California students. He has taught at California State University at Long Beach, University of Southern California, UCLA, Otis Art Institute, California Institute of the Arts, and Laguna Beach School of Art and Design. He rounded his teaching career with a long tenure at California State University, Northridge, where he has bequeathed his superb collection of Tobey's, along with a few Gorkys and important samples of his own work.

In recent years, although he continues to paint, he has increasingly turned to printmaking. Together with his wife Thordis, he still lives in the hillside home he built almost forty years ago in Laurel Canyon, shortly after his arrival on the West Coast.





## INTERVIEW HISTORY

INTERVIEWER: Susan Einstein, Interviewer, UCLA Oral History Program (for "Los Angeles Art Community: A Group Portrait"). BA, Art History, University of California, Los Angeles; MA, Art History, University of California, Berkeley. Photographer, UCLA Museum of Cultural History. Coauthor, Sam Francis (New York, Abrams, 1975).

### TIME AND SETTING OF THE INTERVIEW:

Place: Home and studio of Hans Burkhardt, 1914 Jewett Drive, Los Angeles, California.

Dates: July 28, September 13, November 13 [video session], 1976.

Time of day, length of sessions, and total number of recording hours: The interviews took place in the late afternoon and averaged about one and a half hours each. A total of four hours was recorded.

Persons present during interview: Einstein and Burkhardt, and occasionally Mrs. Burkhardt. Nancy Olexo of the program staff operated equipment at the video session.

### CONDUCT OF THE INTERVIEW:

The interviewer pursued a full biographical study of the subject prior to the interview, utilizing numerous magazine articles and catalog texts as the primary sources of information. The major purpose of the interview was to document Mr. Burkhardt's career as an artist, with particular emphasis on his years in Los Angeles and his perceptions of the evolution of the art scene in Southern California. The interview was structured chronologically with occasional topical digressions.

### EDITING:

The verbatim transcript of the interview was edited by Lawrence Weschler, Assistant Editor, Oral History Program, who checked it for accuracy and edited for punctuation, paragraphing, spelling, and verification



of proper names. Words or phrases introduced by him have been bracketed. The final transcript remains in the order of the original taped material.

Hans Burkhardt then reviewed and approved the edited transcript after making a few additions, corrections, and elaborations.

The edited transcript was reviewed by Joel Gardner, Senior Editor, Oral History Program, prior to its final processing. The index and introduction were prepared by the editor. Other front matter was prepared by the program staff.

#### SUPPORTING DOCUMENTS:

The original tape recordings, video tape, and edited transcripts of the interview are in the University Archives and are available under the regulations governing the use of permanent noncurrent records of the University.

Records relating to this interview are located in the office of the UCLA Oral History Program.



TAPE NUMBER: I, SIDE ONE

JULY 28, 1976

EINSTEIN: We've decided we're going to try and proceed somewhat chronologically, so I'm going to begin by asking you to tell me about where you were born and when, and a bit about your background.

BURKHARDT: All right. I was born in Basel, Switzerland, December 20, 1904. My father left when I was three years old, for New York. And my mother, when I was six years old, died. I had two sisters, and we were brought up in the orphanage in Basel. And during that time, especially during the wartime, things were very bad. We never had enough to eat--we were very, very poor all the time--but we learned how to work and appreciate things in life, especially the better things, because there never was enough food. Even after the war, conditions were very bad in Switzerland.

But anyhow, in school, I always liked to draw, and I saw paintings in the museum which I liked--mostly the romantic paintings, because they didn't look like nature; it was a creation of something which I admired. I liked [Arnold] Boecklin and [Ferdinand] Hodler, especially Hodler. I liked the more progressive artists, even without knowing too much about art.



EINSTEIN: That's interesting.

BURKHARDT: And then, if somebody would have given me a few colored crayons or a little bit of watercolors for a Christmas present, that would have been the greatest Christmas present I ever received. I never had anything until when I learned my trade. After this, the first two weeks' salary a friend of mine borrowed, and I never got the money back; that was my first lesson. But the second time when I got paid, I bought some oil colors, and I would start to copy postal cards of creative things, Arnold Boecklin and people like that. But I make my own creation out of it.

EINSTEIN: So you're actually saying you studied completely on your own.

BURKHARDT: When I was fifteen years old, I learned how to be a gardener. And there I learned three years. I had the most miserable time, worked twelve and fourteen hours a day, never got a cent paid, and never enough to eat. Then, when I was through with this, I went to Basel. I worked there in a place where we had mostly roses and trees; it was a very good place. But in the wintertime, there wasn't any work. So I worked in the chemical industry, went to the chemical industry in the laboratory, and there I had a few nice times. At least it was warm. But the air was bad.

And then I wrote to my father, "I am disgusted with





Switzerland. I would like to come to America." He arranged everything, and in November, 1924--I was just twenty years old--I came to America, where he had a regular meal on the table at night. I couldn't understand that he could eat a regular meal every day. I said, "Is that special for me?" You know, you come from a country like that, and you really appreciate America.

And then my father says, "Well, what can you do?" I said I was a gardener. He said, "There are no gardens in New York." I said, "I like to paint." He said, "Oh, that's different." My father was the foreman in the finest furniture factory in New York. He made only the nicest furniture. And there I got a chance to work in the decorating department. I used to copy all the French screens, the Italian screens, any type of style of furniture. And I was good at it. I went to Cooper Union all the time, every night, on Saturday. I copied the old things, and it gave me pleasure to make them fast and quick and interesting.

EINSTEIN: Were you actually designing?

BURKHARDT: No, I took the old style and made it my own way. I did a lot of Chinese cabinets, but I studied the Chinese, the culture that was of the Chinese, how the Chinese made a cabinet, how the English made the cabinet, how the Dutch made the Chinese cabinet when we went over there. It was



mostly the English cabinets which we reproduced. I made them just as nice and old as the real old ones, with all the little pen work, and it gave me great pleasure.

EINSTEIN: At Cooper Union, when you were learning, you were taking a course in . . .

BURKHARDT: . . . in furniture decoration. I learned the different periods and the style, and how things are decorated. They have a whole floor with good examples. So the first year they gave me the first prize, and they told me they cannot teach me any more. So I wanted to go in their life class there, and it was my fortune that they told me the life class is full, there is no room for anybody. So I went to Grand Central School [of Art] in New York, on Forty-second Street, and there I met Arshile Gorky.

EINSTEIN: Before we talk about Gorky, tell me a little bit about the school. Was this just an art school?

BURKHARDT: Well, they had architects; they had all kinds of courses there, mostly architects. They had different courses there. The art school was very conservative at that time. They had a life class which I never could attend because I always made the old things. And then I met Arshile Gorky in Grand Central School.

EINSTEIN: Was he teaching there?

BURKHARDT: He was teaching there. And Gorky was just



about--oh, he was my age; he was in the early twenties. And he was a great teacher. And I went on a Saturday to his studio, and he was influenced by Cézanne at that time, Cézanne and then Picasso, Miró, Braque, all those people. I looked at some of the modern paintings and said, "My God, it's the thing I searched for my life all the time." For the first time I met someone who opens my eyes to art, to good art.

EINSTEIN: Was this actually your first experience with seeing these things in some sort of historical context?

BURKHARDT: Yeah, that was the first, I used to go to the museum and look at exhibitions, and I used to go in the galleries to look at exhibitions. But I was trained to decorate furniture, to make a living first. And I always made a good living out of it. When I painted, or went to the life class afterwards, I never cared to make things which please people. If you like them, fine; if you don't like them, I just was there to create something, to find something new.

And when I used to study with Gorky, I used to go twice, three times a week to Gorky's studio. First he was down on Washington Square. He had a little studio there, and there he was very much influenced in Cézanne. He used to have all the still lifes on the table, and I



used to compare. He used to show me how to paint, how to handle the paint, where to be clean, where to cut clean, where to go free and so on. And then I started to experiment in my own way already. Later on he moved to Seventeenth Street, near Union Square. There he had a beautiful studio, spotless clean. And the poor fellow starved to death most of the time. I used to pay him so much a month, and I used to bring him food all the time. I put it on the kitchen table, but I never said, "Gorky, I brought you something." I put it on the kitchen table and never said a word. And many times he said to me, "Hans, if I haven't got twenty dollars tomorrow, I'm on the street." I said, "Gorky, tomorrow you have your twenty dollars." Of course, eighty dollars was a high salary then, you know. And he wanted to give me so many paintings. I said, "Gorky, one is more than enough." So I acquired his paintings; I liked them, and I collected some of his paintings and drawings. Sometimes, many times, he showed me how to make an abstraction, and I have kept all these drawings which he made himself where he showed me how it's realistic and how you rework it until it becomes an abstraction.

EINSTEIN: I was reading a bit about Gorky. I was reading that in the early years, before his work really came into its own, he studied existing masterpieces and worked from





existing paintings, even things from art journals and pictures in magazines, especially of people like Picasso, Miró, Matisse and Cézanne. And he was very proud of the fact that he worked from other people, didn't deny he was working from masters, but put this forth as a way of learning.

BURKHARDT: That's right.

EINSTEIN: Can you talk about things he might have said that relate to that?

BURKHARDT: Well, he used to go to the museum and admire certain type of paintings. And then he went into the studio and painted a lot. Sometimes he threw everything out; most everything he painted, he tore up and threw it out. Drawings, beautiful drawings--he just got mad and threw everything out because he said, "That's my learning period." But he always made a Gorky out of it. And he had talent. He was one of the few who really worked for modern art. And it's too bad that he had to die so young. The last period, which is mostly appreciated now, are the paintings [where] the critics say that he's taken the easy way out because he painted them quickly. Well, his time was short, and he wanted to produce as much as possible. He was really a genius. From all the artists from that period, Gorky was still the greatest--to me. And if he would have lived, he would have changed, too. But he was a man who studied the



old masters and then the modern masters, and he accepted the Europeans early, at the right time. And [Willem] de Kooning and I were his students, his top students. Ethel Schwabacher used to go there. She was a rich woman. But de Kooning and I--he was a house painter and I was a furniture decorator--we used to go there, we used to admire Gorky like a genius, and we respected him very much. And he mentioned once, he said, "I have faith for two students." De Kooning is the one and I'm the other one. And I have something in life, to fulfill that statement he made. I have something. When I make a painting, Gorky stands behind me and says, "Work, work, work." That's the way I feel when I make a painting.

Gorky never made a painting, either, to sell. For example, he was very poor, and once a rich woman--the man who lived with him told me that once a rich woman came and wanted a portrait. He made a beautiful portrait, and she's supposed to give him \$2,000. And she says, "Well, the lips are not quite" this or that. He took the painting, tore it apart, threw it in a corner, and told her to get out. That's the type of artist he was. As poor as he was.

EINSTEIN: That's fantastic.

BURKHARDT: He was a fantastic person. He loved--he played the records from the Armenian mountain music. And he himself



was a powerful man--he used to wrestle; he had big hands, a really powerful man. But he never ate right. The cancer of the stomach came because he never ate right, the poor man. He used to go to the corner and get doughnuts and coffee. That's what he lived from. When I came there, I used to bring him cheese and bologna and things, so he had something to eat. But he only lived for his art. Then he got a job at the WPA. There he was the foreman--I think he made about twenty-six dollars--and there he got some painting materials which he used the day he made the heavy abstractions, à la Picasso at that time. He learned from that, you see, but he always made a Gorky. Like Picasso took the Negro style, and nobody condemned Picasso because he took it from other people, too. I have seen paintings by Picasso which are exactly copies from designs. But, you see, Picasso learned it, too; he learned from everybody, but he made a Picasso out of it. The same with Gorky; he made paintings like Matta [Roberto Sebastiano Matta Echaurren], but he made them very superior. And he made them from nature. He went to nature, made his drawings from nature. And then put his Gorky signature to it.

EINSTEIN: What would an art lesson be like?

BURKHARDT: He used to give a long lecture first. I remember the first evening we came there, he said, "Don't



think you are all going to be artists." Now, at that time there were not as many students. He said, "If 1 out of 50,000 or 100,000 becomes a good artist, a real artist, that's a good percentage." He said, "Don't get disappointed." And he used to go through the classes like wild, you know. He knew how to draw. Boy, he could draw. He used to go real wild. And it used to be a pleasure to see him go through the class.

EINSTEIN: Would he correct your work?

BURKHARDT: Yeah, of course. And he drew right over it, or on the side; he explained something on the side. He made a whole drawing on the side; he'd say, "Look, that's the way it could be done." But, you see, he gave each one the opportunity to do his own way of drawing. He could draw realistic, like Ingres--he loved Ingres very much. He . admired him. And the black painting he made, he copied that from a museum; when Ingres made a painting, before it was a color on it, it was black and white. That's where Gorky got his idea of making the black and white paintings.

EINSTEIN: I read about his appreciation for Ingres.

BURKHARDT: You see, he used to go always to the museum and study the masters. And he admired the workmanship of the old masters because these were the people he learned from. In the studio, for example, he'd just have a print of [one]





or two old masters, or a Cézanne print--just two or three of his paintings.

But the easel was always clean. I never saw a dirty brush. I never saw a spot. On the floor, there was a carpet, a little carpet where he painted. There was not one spot of dirt; you could eat from that floor. The floor was an oak floor that was washed--every Saturday that floor was washed. And I was perhaps the only person in the world who had the key to his studio. I could go in anytime--that's how much he thought of me, because I helped him in the time when he needed the money most. I didn't have much either (of course, there was the Depression). But what I know, more or less I learned it from Gorky. He taught me how to see and think for myself, and that's the hardest thing. I remember he used to give a lecture; he says, "I'm in the middle of the ocean trying to find land. And I say that's the same way with you people. You think you know everything. I say you still know nothing; you're still out in the ocean." He said, "I myself have to find land someday." And that's just what I appreciate. He was always honest and outspoken.

EINSTEIN: Was he a member of a certain circle of artists?

BURKHARDT: Well, he was friends of several of that group, the more advanced people. At that time de Kooning and all



that group was not there yet--they were just students--but he had other students. Like David Burliuk was one of his friends, and oh, the man who made Boogie-Woogie.

EINSTEIN: Mondrian?

BURKHARDT: No. The other fellow [Stuart Davis]. He had a show at UCLA some time ago. Well, anyhow, he was friends with the more modern painters, and they came together once in a while and discussed things. Gorky was a very intelligent person.

EINSTEIN: When did he come to the United States?

BURKHARDT: I believe in 1918, or in the twenties, early twenties. I believe he was in Boston, and there he was supposed to learn to be an architect.

EINSTEIN: Did he know Stuart Davis?

BURKHARDT: Stuart Davis was one of his friends. Stuart Davis used to come a lot to his studio.

EINSTEIN: Because apparently he wrote an article about Stuart Davis.

BURKHARDT: Yeah. Stuart Davis was one of the great friends, and he admired his type of work.

EINSTEIN: Apparently Gorky felt that they thought alike, as far as looking at traditional art and modern masters and using that to create a new form.

BURKHARDT: You see, Stuart Davis learned from Picasso and



people, too, but he made a Stuart Davis. He took the object from nature which Gorky was searching for. You see, Gorky made his object on the farm, in nature there, while Stuart Davis lived in the city and he made the city objects, you see. But he made a Stuart Davis out of it, you see.

EINSTEIN: Did Gorky become involved with the surrealists?

BURKHARDT: Yeah, later on, I wasn't there when he . . . . At that time he was still with Picasso. Later on, André Breton influenced him too, and Matta. He was still young--he was only forty-four years old when he died; you see, if he would have lived a little bit longer (let's say twenty, thirty years), perhaps he would have changed, too. But he was a painter, the finest draftsman. There was no finer draftsman in whole New York than Gorky. He really knew how to draw. And fast. And good. And he could draw beautiful. So could de Kooning. De Kooning was a fine draftsman when he was young. He really could draw beautiful. Then he learned from Gorky, and he was influenced with Gorky. Gorky made the wild women in drawings, you see, which de Kooning picked up later and made de Kooning out of it. Which is nothing wrong. As long as he was influenced in Gorky, when he made the abstractions, it was à la Gorky but de Kooning put his own handwriting in it and got famous. Because when Gorky died, it was in '48, and the



New York School just came up, you see. And would he have lived, he would have been a rich man, you see.

EINSTEIN: When did you move to Los Angeles?

BURKHARDT: I moved to Los Angeles in 1937.

EINSTEIN: One other question that just came to me about

New York: Did you ever work on a WPA art project?

BURKHARDT: No, I was working for the concern, and we made furniture, Schmieg and Company. I was the foreman in the decorating department. Sometimes, out of 300 people, there were 12 working. Fortunately, I estimated big jobs, and I was working most of the time. I was only two months out the whole Depression. I was very, very fortunate, because I worked hard, and when the bad times came, there was work there.

EINSTEIN: The reason I thought you might have gotten involved with the WPA is that you seem to be very politically oriented and interested in a lot of issues.

BURKHARDT: You see, perhaps I'm the most what you would call American painter. I paint the way I see America, the beautiful things in America, the things I love--beautiful landscapes, the life of happiness. But I painted things which are wrong, which I feel should be changed, and many of them have changed. Like lynching--very seldom it happens. The dream of one world, that we all should live





together. You know, I don't believe in war. I think war is wrong; it should be settled on the table. That's what I painted. For example, this painting here, Sunrise. It's very strange. I made that painting--I went with a friend of mine down to the harbor, and everyone painted the boats right away. I walked around there, and I found a place where somebody burned some crates, and I found those wires and those old rusty nails, two nails which love each other. And from this I made this painting, that beautiful sunrise. You see, I took things from nature which I learned from Gorky how to see. I learned from Gorky two things: how to put paint on (how do you make a thing correct in quality?), and how to see and think for myself. And that's what I did all my life. And it helped me. Without Gorky I don't know what would have happened to me. But Gorky was the one who really gave me the knowledge, the encouragement to do what I'm doing. Because I could have decorated the furniture, made lots of money. But when it came to my paintings, I never painted for money. I sold many paintings--I have no complaints--I sell many prints, and I sell many pastels. Every time I make a pastel, I never know what I'm going to make--I always search for something new. And when that is gone, you might as well die. An artist has to work and work and work. When other people have a good time, the



artist works and struggles. Same thing in printmaking. I'm making prints because I have no more room for paintings. I wouldn't know where to put them. I just launched another big one right now. I'm going to make this one against smoking, against the signs which are all over. That's my protest against society. What do you see? Smoking and signs of liquor, the worst thing which is for the people. It kills people, and still it's allowed because somebody is making money. That's my revolt--that big painting I'm going to make now--against society, things which I don't think are right.

EINSTEIN: You've always used these kinds of themes. Is it with the intention of making other people aware?

BURKHARDT: I don't care what other people do. It's just my opinion. For example, when Khrushchev said, "We are going to bury you," we're doing that exactly. We don't need the Russians; we do it ourselves. Why can't we live in a society where they tell the people that smoking is so dangerous you can't have the signs anymore? Liquor is the same way. Why should liquor and smoking be promoted the way they do?

MRS. BURKHARDT: But has that got anything to do with art?

BURKHARDT: Well, yes, because that's where I make my paintings, you see. I had several friends of mine who



died from smoking; therefore, I made a whole series of paintings which I'm the only one perhaps in the country who makes that statement. But they have to be paintings first. People, if they want to smoke, that's their privilege. The only thing is, I don't think it's the right thing to see all those signs all over to promote something which is bad for the people. An artist has an obligation to society.

EINSTEIN: I see that. I would just ask if doing that as a poster, perhaps, you might reach more people, if that was your intention. Saying the same thing.

BURKHARDT: But who's going to put the poster up? Who's going to put money into that? Nobody, you see. It's a problem, you see. I just make these things as paintings because there will come a time where it's not allowed anymore to have those big posters all over, "Smoke Kool, Smoke fresh"--smoke, smoke, and drink and drink and drink. Which I think is wrong. If you want to smoke, that's your privilege, but it shouldn't be promoted. It's the only thing you see. Every day, you see, wherever you go, there is a sign. And the streets are full of cigarettes, filthy.

EINSTEIN: Were there issues like this in New York that . . . ?

BURKHARDT: Well, in New York--what did I paint?--I painted



the early abstractions à la Gorky, and not much happened yet. I made some political paintings, things which happened there, but it only started actually when the war broke out.

EINSTEIN: Well, we'll get to that in a minute. Let's talk for just another minute about your paintings in New York, I guess while you were still a student. When you were learning, working out ideas, how would you describe the work you were doing at that point?

BURKHARDT: Well, I was influenced in Gorky because to me it was something new. I didn't know Picasso or anybody. I didn't have the education. I had only eight years of public school and then I had to go to work. I didn't have the opportunity what the people have in this country. And when I came to this country, this was the greatest thing in my life because when I see how the people live--that when you work, you can come to something, which is more than anyplace you can get--I felt like painting; something pushed me to paint, paint, paint. At that time we worked I think fifty-two hours a week, and I used to go every evening to Cooper Union and to Gorky. I painted at home. I painted landscapes outside. And I searched for things already. I tried all different types of painting.

EINSTEIN: What kind of subjects were you doing? I see in here there's some still lifes.





BURKHARDT: Well, I made some still lifes, I made my family, I made my wife, I made my daughter, and I painted landscapes outside. I made a beautiful snow landscape. I went once out on a Sunday morning when it was snowing, with the car; there was only the track of the milkman. And I went to a farm and painted the farm with the hills in the background, and it's still a beautiful painting today. I made it with a knife, and it's still beautiful. But then little by little I made already abstract figures. You see, I tried to find my own--which is not very easy, and the people condemned me always that I was crazy. But I met a fellow, an old Scotsman, he looked at my paintings--I made them quite abstract--and he said, "You know, you're lucky to have a man like Gorky." He says, "I'm a good painter all my life, and I couldn't do those things." He says, "You know how to paint, the furniture, you know how to paint. I admire you for what you are doing." And I have other people said the same thing because I was always more or less in my circles a forerunner, because the people I knew were mostly the conservative people.

EINSTEIN: Through your work.

BURKHARDT: And in New York, I was working every day and didn't get in contact with other artists. Gorky was about the only one, with a few friends that used to come there.

EINSTEIN: That's interesting because that's a generally



pretty important thing for artists to be able to sit and talk to other artists and hear their thoughts.

BURKHARDT: I never had the opportunity. Even when I went to decorate furniture, there was nobody there. What I made in one day, it took them a month to make--because I was fast and I had a love for it. If you're in the business, you have to have a love for the business, otherwise you have no right to be in the business. And the art business is a tough one because it's a matter of satisfaction in life to achieve the best, to give somebody something, when you once go into the country, which people can appreciate and look back at.

EINSTEIN: So it's actually through Gorky that you had contact with the rest of the art world at that time, in a very minor sense.

BURKHARDT: Yeah. You see, Gorky came together with those people who made the modern movement. It was changing slowly in the modern movement, but even at that time in the thirties and forties the conservative people took over, won all the prizes and everything. It was only later in the fifties when actually the abstract schools started to make the big paintings. And this made the change. And Gorky more or less was the forerunner of that school, Gorky with--oh, there were several people. [Lyonel] Feininger was one of them; there was a group of people who were the forerunners



of that school. Then they finally got together and made those big paintings. And they were all good painters. Jackson Pollock was a good painter. He made conservative things; he could draw like an old master. But, you see, Jackson Pollock did not just splatter. He had that movement of those figures, you see, and that's what he put into it, and got famous with it. Franz Kline found the Chinese letter and it was interesting, so he made those big things and got famous for that. You see, something has to happen in order to find something; something has to happen. You've got to have certain excitement, either in something which is happy or sad, whatever happens.

EINSTEIN: That sounds like the stimulus of the group, too.

BURKHARDT: Yeah, the whole group searched for something new, something different, and they became all famous.

Gorky was one of the forerunners from that group.

EINSTEIN: In the thirties, the group idea was not existent yet. What was the art establishment like? You said it was conservative.

BURKHARDT: Well, you had the WPA, you see. They would be educators or they made murals. And Gorky made a mural-- everything was destroyed. For example, as much as I know, Gorky made--I was there when he made the mural for the New York airport. [Mayor Fiorello] La Guardia and the Museum



of Modern Art said it should be modern just like the airplanes, but people wanted to put trees in there and an airplane there and a field and all that. Finally Gorky got the job to make the mural. And there he looked at motors when they were cut apart, how the pistons worked, how the thing works. He made a beautiful American stripe there on the rudder; he really made beautiful drawings. He used to throw them away all the time, too; I'm sorry I didn't pick them up. And a few years later when McCarthy had the witch-hunt, they went to him to find out whatever happened to those drawings, if he has anything left. Gorky said, "Yeah, I think I have a few. Here it is." He said, "What do you want?" The investigator says, "How's that you put a Russian star in there?" Gorky took it from a Texaco station--Texaco still has the star today--but they condemned Gorky and the murals disappeared; they destroyed them. This shouldn't happen. In any country, when a mural is made and it's a good mural, no other party should have a right to destroy that mural, because he wouldn't have anything. If he liked it or not--if it's a bad mural I can understand, they agree, it should be painted over. But if it's a good mural, and if it's made through the government (privately they can do what they want), if it's made through the government, nobody should have the right to destroy the murals. It would have





been one of the finest murals made in this country. And he really worked hard.

EINSTEIN: That's incredible. I keep hearing these stories about things that were destroyed, the Diego Rivera mural . . . .

BURKHARDT: There it was a little different. [John D.] Rockefeller had the right, but he should have put something over it and saved the mural. He didn't have the right to destroy it. But he should have the right to hide it. When a master makes something like that, it never should be destroyed. If they don't like it, they can put another wall or something in front and keep it for the next generation. Because the WPA, they made some good work; the artists worked together, and it was a very happy time for artists.

EINSTEIN: And it gave everybody work.

BURKHARDT: It gave a chance because there are hardly any murals. In Mexico, as much as I know, when a government building is made, 10 percent of the cost is either for sculpture or murals. Here, there is not enough money. When they make a building, a modern one, they put a fountain there, an old-fashioned fountain in front, because they have no money to do anything else.

EINSTEIN: I think there are some people trying to legislate exactly that kind of thing, like the Mexican method.

BURKHARDT: You see, when there is no money in it, it's



very difficult. Look at the Mexican quarters. They make some very nice murals on some of the walls. It's the destroying of the thing--I'm against people taking a spray can and writing all over, ruining the whole neighborhood. Now they're changing; they're making some good murals and beautiful murals, you see. That's what I like to see. This is the culture of America: not to destroy but to build up and make a good country.

EINSTEIN: Let's move on. You came to the West Coast in 1937. Why did you decide to move out here?

BURKHARDT: Well, I had family trouble in New York. I was married--I don't want to say much about it. Things didn't go right, and there was absolutely no justice in the domestic relations quarter. Things went so bad, so I just couldn't take it anymore. And I left everything and came out here.

EINSTEIN: Why did you choose Southern California?

BURKHARDT: Because I thought I'd get a chance to work in a movie as a decorator. Of course, things were bad all over, and then I finally found a job painting furniture. A year later I went to Rennick furniture; there I used to decorate furniture and make fake antiques and all that. I made a living. I made twenty-five dollars a week, and it was a lot of money at that time. Then I painted, and I



started to build my own house.

EINSTEIN: I wanted to ask you how you happened to end up here. It's on tape and the reader can't see it, but it's a very, very beautiful location, and I know you've been here since you first moved out.

BURKHARDT: I lived with a friend, and one day he said, "Look, in the paper it says, 'View lot for sale, \$300.'" He said, "Let's go and see it." I came up here with a car. I said, "Where's the lot?" He said, "Down here." And it was just a hill going down. I saw the opportunity that we could build a house. And then I started and built it; you know, everything was cheap at that time. A friend of mine-- I didn't know anything about building. I had a friend of mine who knew how to start, because it has to be made according to specifications (you cannot just build a house; it has to be inspected by the city). He helped me, and we put everything up to the floor level. Then one day he says, "Good-bye, I have another job." Then I put everything up myself. I put the beams up; I put the roof on and everything.

At that time I was single. I used to have nothing in here except the outer walls, and I used to paint at night here. I used to work in a defense plant during the week, during the day. We worked twelve hours a day. And in the evening I used to come home and paint. I had my easel here.



I used to paint in this corner. I had a few racks here, and I had my paintings. I used to go to Hollywood evening school to draw for the nudes.

EINSTEIN: Oh, my God, what a schedule.

BURKHARDT: And I had some beautiful drawings from there. I've still got some of them which I wouldn't part with any money.

EINSTEIN: Why did you choose to go there?

BURKHARDT: Because they had a life class there; you see, they had a model there. And it was a place to go in the evening to draw from the model.

EINSTEIN: It fit into your schedule, too, I guess.

BURKHARDT: I used to go twice a week, and I used to enjoy it.

But, you see, then I made the war paintings. Whenever something happened, I came home excited. For example, I made a painting [The Prayer] one evening in two hours. When we made the invasion from England into France, I made the father and mother like a monument praying for the son who gave his life for the betterment of the world. You see. I made a painting when the Russians came back and came to a village and everybody was dead. The feeling when they came back, that there was nothing left. Then I made a painting of a soldier when he is dead [Forgotten Soldier].





Nobody gives a damn. They gave him a gun, they say, "Go and shoot," and nobody gives a damn. So when anything happened, I made a certain painting. But then at the end, I made a painting, From War to Peace. The feeling of all my war paintings at the end is always my belief that it shouldn't have happened, the feeling that from war to peace and the peace should last.

EINSTEIN: I'd like to go back again. At this point you were working independently. Did you meet up with other artists in Los Angeles?

BURKHARDT: Well, in Los Angeles, when I came out here in 1936, I met Lorser Feitelson. Now, Feitelson was one of the few people who promoted modern art, just like Gorky did in New York. Feitelson has done more than any other artist in this town in the earlier period to promote the people he had faith in who were in the modern movement. I mean, we had good people out here. We had Man Ray out here; he lived here in Los Angeles. We had Knud Merrild, who was one of the forerunners of the New York School. We had Fred Kahn, who was a very advanced painter in a certain type of painting. And we had good people. I met those people and I lived with them. [tape recorder turned off]

In 1939, Feitelson said to me if I would like to have a show, and that was my first one-man show out here. The



strange thing is I painted really quite modern then, and it was not in style. It was not--because the conservative people controlled mostly everything, and the other artists had a hard time, the ones which struggled for something different.

EINSTEIN: How could Feitelson just come to you and say, "Do you want to have a one-man show?"

BURKHARDT: Of course, he saw my work.

EINSTEIN: Did he have a gallery at this time?

BURKHARDT: No, it was a gallery on--oh, let's see, what's the name of that gallery again? It was one of the good galleries on Wilshire Boulevard [Stendahl Galleries]. Somebody was supposed to have a show there and cancelled the show, and they wanted to have a show quickly. The very strange thing is that I sold one painting--it was a little abstract painting, quite abstract--and the man who bought the painting (that was the first painting he ever bought) is now one of the biggest collectors back east, and that painting he cherishes as the beginning of his big collection [Roy Friedman of Chicago].

EINSTEIN: Well, Feitelson was as much a promoter then as an artist.

BURKHARDT: Feitelson did more for the modern movement in this town than any other artist.



EINSTEIN: He knew all the young artists.

BURKHARDT: He was an intelligent person. He knew the artists, and he really worked for the ones he had faith in. And he promoted, you know, people like that. And then we had Arthur Millier, who was a critic. He was in a strange position. Working for the paper, you know, he had to please the paper. As soon as I made the paintings against the studio, those political paintings, the paper didn't favor me. But I don't care; I painted anyhow what I wanted. I don't care what anybody writes; that's their privilege. I didn't get a decent write-up for ten years after because they wouldn't give him the right to write anything good--even when I made a lot of paintings there of the dancers and lovers. I made beautiful paintings of lovers. Like in New York, there's no place to go, so the lovers go on the roof, and there they make love. Whatever they do is their business, you see. So I made a number of beautiful paintings, lovers all over. And they were very successful. Like I could have painted these over and over and over and sell them. Then I met a group of dancers, and then I made dancers, abstract dancers. And they sold very well.

But then the war came, the war paintings. I think I sold only one or two; I didn't even want to sell them. They belong to the people. They can read the history.



Like I made a painting in 1942, Concentration Camp. I showed the horror, showed that it's wrong, and I made some shocking paintings. You know, when I found out what happened, it really made me mad--then you paint. You cannot--like Rico Lebrun made sometimes Buchenwald twenty years later, but it hasn't got the spirit. You've got to make it when it happens. When you're in love, you paint the beautiful things, the movement, the colors, you know, the happiness of dancers, the glory that we are in a different world of love. But when the war breaks out, you see the horrible things which are happening. You get excited and you condemn the war.

EINSTEIN: You have a certain expressionist tendency, I think.

BURKHARDT: You see, I'm one of the few painters, I don't belong to any group. If I see something which I can express realistically, I express it realistically to a certain extent. But love, hate--you cannot see. The bells which ring for that man who dies, or the funeral, or for a wedding, you cannot see the sounds of the bells. Therefore, I make the sounds, you see; therefore, they have to be abstract. That's a different type of painting. But the people always said, "Well, he paints both." Well, certain things you can feel, other things you can see, and you have to make both. But I always go back to nature, and from nature I make my own.





For example, I went a lot to Mexico to paint. One day on a Sunday morning I came down a hill, and there was a burial. They bring them there from the farms in a coffin to the church for the last blessing, and there I saw them, and the bells were ringing. I said, "Now, how can I paint the sounds of those bells, which ring for the last time for that poor man?" Because the bells ring for him to go into a better world. It's not a sad thing in Mexico; the bells ring for him to go from his world into the better world. I said, "How can I make those sounds?" And I took it from figures I made, drawings, made the sounds come down. And I made some of the most beautiful paintings. But people say, "What is it?" How can you express it? Either you look at it and you accept my feeling--it's called Silent Sounds, and either you have to accept it, you can imagine what you want.

EINSTEIN: That was a series of paintings?

BURKHARDT: It was a series, a beautiful series, too, called the bell series.

EINSTEIN: You once said something about that, that you like to work in series.

BURKHARDT: Well, you see, when I go to Mexico, first of all, I don't paint the people in Mexico and the landscapes, because everybody does that. I learned the culture of Mexico. I lived with those people, and then I paint. For



example, I make some of the most beautiful paintings from a burial where the coffin is on top from the back. It's just like an entrance, and the coffin on top is abstracted, and I call that Entrance into Mexico [1950]. And you see the old building next to it. It's my own cathedral I built. I don't copy their cathedrals. I take the culture from Mexico and make the cathedrals, that they believe that there is something better after. You see, when I make--oh, I make a dead animal, which is very sad in Mexico. I make some sad things. I go to the morgue, and I draw from the dead, you know. But I make from this place the journey to the better world; I don't make the sad things. I promote the better movement which they believe. They believe when you leave this earth, you go to a better earth. You see, in a graveyard, when I make a skull or something, this is only the earthly remain after the soul has left. When I make a burial, it's not a burial; it is the journey into the better world, you see. And people do not understand this. They say, "Oh, he makes burials."

EINSTEIN: Well, it's different in our culture. I mean, Mexican Day of the Dead . . . .

BURKHARDT: That's when you go to Mexico, you live there--you have to understand the culture of Mexico in order to paint. Because when Rivera and [José] Orozco painted, there



was revolution, and they were excited and made masterpieces. Today, what is happening? Nothing is happening, and we have no Mexican painters so to speak of. You still have [Rufino] Tamayo, but he's an international painter; he takes Mexico and Picasso and the French period and makes a Tamayo out of it. But nothing is happening. Therefore, there are no great painters. If something happens, a great painter always--he gets excited when something really happens in life. Otherwise what's he going to paint? What shall I paint? Go to the studio--I have a day off--I cannot make another painting. I know what would sell, but I don't make that type of painting. I'm searching for something new all the time.

EINSTEIN: When you first came and you were a stranger in Los Angeles, did you ever feel like getting into Los Angeles culture in the way of being a foreigner in Mexico?

BURKHARDT: I did. I made, for example, the little house, which is a historical painting of the airport when it was small, which was red and white stripes [End of the Runway]. The little house. I made that. I showed culture of Los Angeles. When everybody paints a beautiful house, I go to the back and see how the telephone poles are, and this is Los Angeles, you see. I made a painting against smog in 1953 [Smog]. I said something is wrong because before the



air was so beautiful. And I made a painting; I showed the hill with strange shapes coming out of it of agony, and there's a dead child (which I copied in Mexico City from the morgue), and then on the bottom there's a bench. It says "Mortuary" where you sit on. And there's a skull there and a hole. And when the bus comes there and the bus leaves you, you're going to drop in the hole, that bus makes so much smog. We had good trolley cars. I've got paintings of trolley cars yet, which are historical paintings. And the smog. You see, those paintings are historical. I made the beautiful things in Los Angeles, and the sad things, too.





TAPE NUMBER: I, SIDE TWO

JULY 28, 1976

EINSTEIN: We took a short break, and I'm going to go back to when you first came out to Los Angeles in 1937 and ask a bit about your first impressions of the art scene out here. You had just come from New York. How did that differ?

BURKHARDT: Well, here the painters who controlled everything were more or less conservative painters. And very few--when I made something abstract, it was not very much in style.

EINSTEIN: Is that because modern masterworks that you might have been able to see in New York, Picasso's paintings and the Mirós, were not being shown on the West Coast?

BURKHARDT: Not only this. Picasso came up around that period, more or less. But like, the New York School was conservative, too. Mostly every painter was a conservative painter, and the same thing out here. You had good conservative painters who really were good in their field, but there were very few artists who worked more in the abstract or more modern period. They were not recognized; they were not appreciated.

EINSTEIN: By "conservative," do you mean they were painting traditional subjects, traditional . . . ?



BURKHARDT: More or less. They painted portraits and a lot of scenery--well-painted but not what you would call in a modern manner. And the ones who painted modern, they were forgotten, more or less. For example, Knud Merrild painted what he called flux, a certain way of the modern movement, à la Jackson Pollock, almost. And he died poor; he was a poor man. And we had Fred Kahn out here. He came out in the forties. He had a gallery on Sunset Boulevard, the Circle Gallery. Now, he had a few people there. He had shows of Man Ray, extremely modern--what they call modern today, Man Ray made then. But he was more or less known for photography rather than painting. Then you had--Knud Merrild was a house painter, and he painted these flux paintings, which were very much advanced. But he very seldom sold anything.

EINSTEIN: How could an artist make a living?

BURKHARDT: Well, mostly everyone did something on the side. Either he was a teacher, or a house painter, or a furniture finisher, or had some job. Most of the artists at that time would teach; either they worked in a studio as scenic artists, or match-out artists, or they were teaching. Most of them had a teaching job somewhere. In Chouinard they all had certain styles. Now, you had some good people in that period, but they were not what you would call painters which



painted their own paintings; they all looked like they belonged to a certain group of painting which was styled in that particular period. There were a lot of California landscape painters. And some of them were darn good. Emil Kosa [Jr.] could paint beautiful; his father was a better painter. He was a painter trained in Paris, and he was a wonderful painter, but he's forgotten, because he didn't bring anything new to the world. What he did was good, and you couldn't paint any better, but it was nothing new that you could sign your name to it. And to make something new is a very difficult thing--it takes a lifetime to get that far. A painting should speak for itself. Many of my paintings are not signed. I look back, and some of the early things--very seldom were they signed. The paintings just speak for themselves.

EINSTEIN: What other galleries do you remember beside the Circle Gallery from this period?

BURKHARDT: Well, we had good relationship with the [L.A. County] Museum [of Art] at that time. I had a nice show in the early forties in the museum [1945], a one-man show. We had Frank Perls, who was one of the finest galleries, and he showed Paul Klee. And we had painters here like the painter who painted in New York for the Metropolitan Opera, Berman, Eugene Berman; he was here, too. People like that



were showing. And they were already in the modern style. Then we had a gallery on Sunset Boulevard, Mirendorff--the man died--where you could buy a portrait for \$25, \$35 a drawing, a painting for \$100. We had some good galleries. Later on, Paul Kantor; then we had Felix Landau a little bit later--fine galleries that had only good things. We had some real good galleries here. And the mood, it was exciting, everything. They brought things in from other countries, from Italy and from France, and they showed Picasso and Braque and all these people. It was a time of excitement and happiness for the artist. And they used to be all on La Cienega, most of them. And every Monday night, hundreds of people there were going to the galleries. It was a wonderful life for the artists. Today, the place is empty and there's nothing. I don't mind something new if it's good, but it has to be good first; it has to be a piece of art first, not junk. Because it's new--that's not saying that it's art.

EINSTEIN: Your early relationship with the museum was good, then.

BURKHARDT: Yeah, very good.

EINSTEIN: What was the museum like in the late thirties?

BURKHARDT: Well, it was the old museum, before they built this one. And once a year we had a show of all the artists in the community.





EINSTEIN: Wasn't that a contest, a juried show?

BURKHARDT: It was a competition, a juried show. Now, I won some prizes. The one which they bought was in 1945, One Way Road. It's a beautiful painting. It won first prize. But many times there were certain groups of artists who gave always each other each the prizes.

EINSTEIN: Who would be on the juries?

BURKHARDT: Well, it was mostly the group of artists which belonged to an organization, and they changed from year to year. And when, for example, Rico Lebrun was a juror, everybody painted like Rico Lebrun to get in the show, which I think is wrong. For example, I painted my beautiful Christ painting in red. I worked the whole year on it. It's a masterpiece in painting--I still love it--one of the best paintings ever made. The museum curator put that on the side and said, "I cannot show that to the jury because that's communistic." I showed the painting, which is one of my very, very best paintings I ever painted, Atomic Bomb, in 1947. It was rejected, and a flower piece, which the museum sold long ago, won the first prize. It's a matter of jury. It's not that the painting is bad. The best paintings I ever painted were rejected.

EINSTEIN: It sounds like they had a rather provincial attitude.



BURKHARDT: You see, because nobody wanted to see an antiwar painting. They wanted to see a bunch of flowers, and it succeeded. Now, you have a certain group of painters which won prizes. For that period, it was good for Los Angeles.

EINSTEIN: Why do you say that?

BURKHARDT: Because they were good painters in their field. But they were always on the conservative style which was painted before. They were good in their field, but the modern ones only had a chance later. And then Rico Lebrun came in, and you had to paint like him, otherwise you wouldn't get in the show.

EINSTEIN: What gave the modern painters a better chance? What attitude changed in the museum?

BURKHARDT: Well, because Feitelson, for example, was one who worked for more modern exhibitions.

EINSTEIN: He was connected with the museum directly?

BURKHARDT: At that time, too. But the museum, they always had trouble there. You know, you couldn't please everybody; you couldn't please everybody today, you know. There's a clique in now which maybe in five or ten years, most of them will be forgotten again. So it has been all the time through all the years in Los Angeles. But there are some painters, after a hundred years they'll still be known. For example, Francis De Erdely made his best drawings when he fought in



Spain for the freedom of Spain. He made his best drawings; they were masterpieces. But then later on he did mother and child, just like the old masters; he did it well, but he needed money--he was sick, you know, and he needed money. He was not a painter--more a draftsman--but he was a decent person, and everybody loved him as a teacher. But that's as far as he got, and he's already forgotten. Most of the people which were famous during that period are forgotten today. And that's the way it goes through all the centuries.

EINSTEIN: What kind of shows did the museum put on at that point?

BURKHARDT: Well, they had a sculpture show of different sculptors here. They had a watercolor show from the [California] Watercolor Society. From what is going on in this town, they had once a year a painting show, which was a competition for all the painters here. It was exciting then.

EINSTEIN: I remember a van Gogh show--this was later than the period we're talking about, probably around '54 or something. Did anything like that happen in Los Angeles ten years before?

BURKHARDT: No, let's see. The first show was--about six, seven years ago, they had a van Gogh show here.

EINSTEIN: Well, I remember one from when the museum was



down in Exposition Park. I was just . . . .

BURKHARDT: They might have had smaller ones, but the big one in the County Museum was about six, seven years ago.

EINSTEIN: I'm talking about the early, or middle, even late forties. Did anybody even try to put on a show of the modern masters?

BURKHARDT: Yeah, every once in a while you saw a Picasso or a Braque or something. Slowly those people were showing. They had some good shows.

EINSTEIN: But the exposure must have been a lot less than what you had seen in New York.

BURKHARDT: Oh, yeah, sure, because this place was never recognized as--you could be the greatest artist out here, and you're forgotten if you lived here. You had to live in New York in order to get into the clique, and if you didn't belong in the clique, you didn't get in either. Like Mark Tobey--he made beautiful modern things, small. Because he didn't paint them big, he didn't belong to the clique. And he will be recognized as one of the great ones in this century. It only takes time. You have a clique all the time. You have today a clique. If you don't paint something stupid, you don't get in the show. It always has been like that, and it always will be like that. But you still have to do whatever you believe in, right or wrong.





I don't make a painting to please people; I make it to express something. If people like it, it's fine; if they don't like it, it's just too damn bad. When I made my paintings of the crucifixion [1949-50], it was a challenge because that painting has been painted more than any other painting in the world, and to make it different is a certain challenge. So I painted first a conservative one--not too conservative--which is now in the university [Crucifixion I]. It is still a beautiful painting, a feeling of peace--beautiful, in grays and heavy painted, almost à la Rouault in quality. And then I made the red Christ, which I worked a long time on. And to me I am the only person who painted the red Christ. Why to me red--that means he's alive, his blood lives. And I made him like a flower--when you break a flower, the stem, the neck, is hanging down, and the head is there. And I made several everlasting lights, the feeling of the crucifixion with the light burning. The light is burning: he's the light of the world. And to keep his way of thinking is the only way you live in peace and happiness. That's why I make those paintings, and I made about twenty different crucifixions and some beautiful ones. It's just a challenge: how can you make it different than anybody else?

EINSTEIN: It's about the same time that Rico Lebrun was



working on his crucifixion, is that right?

BURKHARDT: No, I made mine before. Rico Lebrun came in the fifties.

Then, in the fifties, beginning in 1950, I went to Mexico. I had two years under the GI Bill, and I went down there to paint for two years. And then later I went on my own. And there I learned how to live with the people, how they think, and the culture; I learned the culture. And then, little by little, I painted the culture of Mexico. They believe that there is something better. I made the Silent Sounds [1960] which ring for the--I made the happy children in Kindergarten [1950]. I went to the graveyards; I saw seeds came down from one of those jacarandas, big seeds, and when you open them up, you see the seeds in there--beautiful. So I made a painting, the death of the person they buried, and the seeds of young life which is just starting.

EINSTEIN: Right before you left for Mexico, you had been working in the studios a brief period. Is that correct?

BURKHARDT: I worked for a small period, but I worked for a concern, Rennick's, on Sunset Boulevard. We specialized in early American furniture and early English, specialized in that field. That's where I learned how to make my house, how to polish furniture, and working by hand. And



from there I had my own shop for two years before I went to Mexico. But I had so much work, I couldn't paint anymore. So I said, "The heck with the business!" I gave everything to a friend of mine. I said, "Give me twenty-five dollars a month for two years, and you can have the machinery and everything." And I went to Mexico. And this was the greatest thing in my life. It would have taken me twenty years to get that far, what I have learned in two years in Mexico.

EINSTEIN: Where did you go?

BURKHARDT: I was . . . . Guadalajara, in a little town of Zapopan near Guadalajara. That's where I spent many years, and then later I went to San Miguel. I had a friend there. I used to go in the graveyards; we used to go to the morgue. And when we came there, the Mexicans in Guadalajara, the students, used to holler, in Spanish, "Oh, here come the barbarians!" They'd say, "Why you want to draw from these dead ones?" I'd say, "Why you want to cut them apart?" I'd say, "The way you learn, I want to learn, too." And then I made those paintings, The Journey into the Unknown, and they said, ah, now they could understand my way of drawing, why I took those things. And I used these drawings many times in the antiwar paintings and in the antismoking paintings. You see, I used those dead bodies to show what



happened. You see, I have so many sketchbooks, some of the most beautiful sketchbooks. I can show you some from my trips; some of them are absolutely beautiful. Even in Mexico, when I look at some of the drawings I have made, and the big drawings, which I never have shown even . . . . I got big stacks of pastels from that, never been shown. It's a shame. And they're absolutely beautiful.

EINSTEIN: I'm looking through this catalog as you were talking, and there's a couple of paintings here, one called Without a Trial, in 1947, where it looks like you might have used some of those drawings.

BURKHARDT: No, that was before. This particular one I made when they took a colored man out of a jail in Florida and lynched him. I say this . . . .

EINSTEIN: Did you read about it in the paper?

BURKHARDT: Ja. On the radio, you know. And I say this: if a person does something wrong, let the court decide if the man is guilty or not, not the people. People have no right to lynch anybody because it could happen that they lynch an innocent man, too. And they have no right to take a life of somebody. Let the court decide if the man is guilty or not. That's why I make that painting. And people told me I shouldn't even show it, because at that time, you know, the relationship between white and black





was very touchy. But I had the nerve to show these paintings. And I showed that painting in 1945--when the United Nations started--my Dream of One World, that we all should live together as one world. I made a yellow, black, and white race in the abstract, and a new form is born: it's the first child of the world. It's neither color; it's not American or Chinese. It's the child of the world. That's my dream. And if the world will exist, my dream will come true someday.

EINSTEIN: And did you get a reaction from that?

BURKHARDT: Well, you know, at that time people were negative. They say, "Why do you want to paint a thing like that?" But it's my belief.

EINSTEIN: How about this painting here called Protest?

BURKHARDT: That there was the picket line at the studio in 1945, two unions fighting each other. And I say this: if the unions fight each other, it should be settled on a table in a union hall, not in a picket line. And there's the old woman sitting there with a sign; it says, "Did I bring a son into the world like this?" It ruins the labor; it ruins the studios; it ruined everything--the fall of the unions which are corrupt. That never should happen; that should be settled on a table, one or the other way. It was not one man against the other; it was union against



union. And it's the same union that should have been settled on the table right in the beginning. It was a bloody fight; it was terrible. I mean, the whole thing was a disgrace to the unions. And [Ronald] Reagan was the head of the Actors Guild at that time. I got a painting here, a painting that was the Studio Scab [or Reagan and the Actors Guild]. If the actors wouldn't have gone through the picket line, they would have had to settle on the table, the way it should have been settled. But, you see, Reagan and his group got in and the old progressives got kicked out. I still got that painting, and that painting stays here. There's nothing he can do about it. He made it. I just painted it.

EINSTEIN: Do you want to give it to the Democrats this year?

BURKHARDT: Well, I don't think it's necessary. I think he made a mistake already.

EINSTEIN: You think he's had it.

BURKHARDT: He's had it. But you see, I made these things. For example, in New York, when I came to the domestic relations court when I broke up with my wife, everyone who came to investigate says, "Why don't you get out of town? There's no justice here." You know, there are certain things. I hung the judge there in a painting and marked



underneath, "Justice." Because they had a few old people who didn't know much about the law. They were volunteers for the domestic relations court. And they didn't protect the man. The woman could do whatever she wanted and get still credit. That's where that painting came from.

EINSTEIN: You mentioned before, when the tape was off, that they were even calling you a Communist during this era.

BURKHARDT: Let's say this: When I came to California in 1937, the Communist party was on the ballot; you could vote communistic, you could vote anything. Now, it was Depression, and a lot of people voted communistic. They were not Russians. They were Americans who, during that time, felt this system may be a good system. Later on they found out it was not a good system and they did not vote communistic anymore. It was on the ballot, you could vote it and it was legal. But, you see, as soon as I made a painting of the picket line, right away they condemned me as being a Communist.

EINSTEIN: Who are they?

BURKHARDT: The unions, the paper, you know, the Hearst newspaper [Los Angeles Examiner] and also the L.A. Times.

EINSTEIN: The art critics?

BURKHARDT: Yes. But you see, they didn't realize what I



meant when I made a painting like that. I didn't make it to be anticapitalist. I made these paintings to say a picket line is wrong. It should be settled on the table, not on the picket line. And they didn't understand that. Same thing with the war painting: There is never a flag. I say war is wrong; I take neither side. Now, sure, every country wants to win, but there are times when nobody wins--even if you win, you lose. You lose 50,000, 500,000 men, whatever, or a million men; and even if you win, look at the sacrifice.

EINSTEIN: Okay, let's go back again to Mexico. I'm really fascinated by the way you seemed to try to understand the culture. Could you speak Spanish at the time?

BURKHARDT: Oh, enough to get along. Everybody speaks English, you know, when you go down there. I spoke a certain amount of Spanish, which I needed, but I never was good in languages like my wife. But I went there to paint. You see, some strange things happened there. I used to go out and paint. I used to go into the graveyards.

EINSTEIN: You mentioned an experience on the Day of the Dead.

BURKHARDT: I made all these paintings. Whenever something happened, I made a painting. When I saw a dead animal, for example . . . . My friend picked up a little dog on the street, he was so sick, and the poor thing was so grateful,





he came to eat. But there was no hope for him. He died on Easter morning. So I painted that dog just the way he was lying there, a big head, starved to death. Everybody kicked him. You know, there's a feeling--I called it Suffering's End, and I made two paintings. When I brought my paintings back here, I didn't want to even show that Suffering's End. I signed the paintings, and my friend bought one of them right away. That's the first painting I sold from Mexico. And an artist made an exchange with one of the paintings; he took the other one. But then, the beautiful thing, the journey into the better world, I made many paintings. I buried the politicians, the rotten politicians which are in jail, with the blue sky outside--they can't get out. There is no hope for those people. And I made a lot of religious paintings when there was a ceremony, the journey into a better world, and child burial, that he take the child to heaven because it hasn't got a sin. That's the way the Mexican people believe. Actually it's neglect from the church and the government. Because those people live in filth, and nobody gives a damn about them. Now it has changed, but at that time it was just terrible. But, you see, the church says, "Oh, nothing happened. The child didn't have a sin, so he went to heaven." So I made a painting, the church blessing the child from the transition



from the real child into the soul. And I made some beautiful paintings on that--real religious paintings, but the soul of Mexico, the way the people believe is the best. And I love Mexico's colors, beautiful colors there, you know, the excitement.

EINSTEIN: And the festivals.

BURKHARDT: So I made the jungle. I went into the jungle, and I made jungle paintings. In the evening, a beautiful feeling of gold all over. But I always made sketches of everything. All my paintings you can find in my sketch-books, every one of them.

EINSTEIN: How are your sketches preparation for your paintings? How do you work from your sketch?

BURKHARDT: Mostly just black and white, sometimes a few colors.

EINSTEIN: Pencil?

BURKHARDT: No, some pencil, but mostly ink. Or I use some colors which you cannot use in the open because in the book they stay. It's just to get the colors.

EINSTEIN: Because I look at your drawings and they have a very different quality than your paintings.

BURKHARDT: No, the paintings are drawings; that's just drawing with paint. But, you see, with a pencil drawing or a pen is one line, while paint is paint. You paint the



same way; the only thing is that it becomes color. It's color against color.

EINSTEIN: Well, your color is very important.

BURKHARDT: You see, for example, I see the happy children in Mexico, and this is the guardian angel here, guarding the children in the kindergarten. The children are just happy forms. I make dancing children; with all the sadness around, you see children dancing. I made beautiful paintings. I sold them like hotcakes, but I only made so many when the time was right, and that's it. I cannot repeat those things. If somebody says make another one like that, I can't. You have to live the spirit when you see those children dance.

EINSTEIN: The illustration I'm looking at is of the Kindergarten, which is 1950, and I guess you would call it very abstract. You can pick out figurative forms. But if you would have made preparatory drawings or drawings working up to this painting, would it have gone through stages?

BURKHARDT: Yeah, it started out with real children, and then it became abstract, and with the happiness of the children more than the children. It shows a group of happiness there, in color and form, without being a child as a child. It's just some happy feeling of something young. And there's the guardian angel watching them.

EINSTEIN: And the color.



BURKHARDT: Beautiful. You see, all those paintings I give to my wife because I could sell them all the time. So I can say, "Look, that belongs to my wife."

EINSTEIN: I'm reading that in between your trips to Mexico you came back up here, and at one point spent some time in the Sierras, working there.

BURKHARDT: There I made paintings. I went with a friend of mine to before you come in the Mojave Desert; we went in there in the desert at a rock when you go to Mount Whitney, up there. And I made the drawings from the rocks. And the seeds are found on the ground, desert seeds; it's beautiful forms. It was in 1957, and I made quite a number of abstract landscapes. There is only one left, and that's not for sale. The others I sold like hotcakes. They were beautiful things, the feeling of the beautiful feeling of beautiful America. That was one period again. You see, when nothing happens, you don't paint. But something happens and . . . . I saw those colors, you know, and something new again; and I painted, and I painted good, you know, beautiful. Sure I sold everything. Then you make other paintings again.

EINSTEIN: Did you have shows in galleries during this period when you were in Mexico?

BURKHARDT: Oh, all the time. I had lots of shows. I had shows in Mexico. In the museum there I had a show [Museo





de Bellas Artes, Guadalajara, 1951; Instituto Allende, San Miguel, 1956, 1958, 1960], and the Mexicans liked it very much. It was their culture; they could understand that. There was a man, barefoot, and he looked in. He sold pretzels or cookies, and he spoke English. So I found out he was an American who went to Mexico and wanted to live like the Mexicans. He said it was the most beautiful show he has ever seen, because the show has a soul. This is Mexico, the way I painted it. And they liked it very much.

EINSTEIN: During the middle fifties, you participated in lots of shows all across the country, group exhibitions. I see repeatedly Whitney Museum shows.

BURKHARDT: Mostly I was invited in all the big shows.

EINSTEIN: What's the procedure? How did they contact you?

BURKHARDT: I just got a letter that I'm invited. They must have seen some of my work. For example, the Metropolitan Museum had a big painting which is in the school now, The Burial of Gorky [1950]. It's a masterpiece in painting; it's really good. But you see, I made these from the cathedrals in Mexico, you see, a structure, and then a body on top. The feeling, the journey into a better world, which I actually took from cathedrals, shapes and the human beings together. Each one has a little cross, the Catholic religion in Mexico, and the first one has a little guiding



light which goes in the better world. And I made two smaller ones. One won the first prize in Sacramento in the [1951] state fair, and they have that one; I still have only one left.

EINSTEIN: And you also participated in a biennial in Sao Paulo [Brazil (1955)].

BURKHARDT: I was invited; they came up here. At that time, I was very good with the museum here. They had a man who always did a lot for the people here; he really worked for the Los Angeles artists. They came up here. They wanted one painting. They selected two paintings and a drawing. And I was the only one who had three pieces in Sao Paulo. And it came very close to the prize. And if you would compare my painting to the prize--it also becomes friendship then. And I can understand that. But it was nice enough I got in the show, anyhow. Now the one painting is in the school; the other one, I still got here.

EINSTEIN: That's at [California State University at] Northridge.

BURKHARDT: Yes.

EINSTEIN: When you were showing during this period, were you being reviewed? What was the critical response?

BURKHARDT: Well, generally they asked me for a few photographs and then they selected one. Or, like Sao Paulo, they



came direct here and selected a painting. And it happened that the two abstract landscapes which I made in the High Sierra . . . . For example, I went once there, and I made a painting of love, of nature. I saw two bugs--each one had a little cross on his back--making love; one had to walk with the other one, and this was a symbol of love. I made a square, like, and I used the nails I found, the old rusty nails which were together, making still love after the fire [Love of Two Nails (1952)]. I used those symbols in those paintings, and part of the landscape which I found around it. The song of the birds when I was drawing there--I heard the birds sing in the forest; one gives a warning, and I used the sound of those birds in those paintings. I make very, very nice paintings. I make a lot of happy paintings, too.

EINSTEIN: Good. Looking around your house, there are lots of things that you've collected and brought back from Mexico, and probably other places, too. Would you like to talk about that a bit?

BURKHARDT: Well, in Mexico at that time it was not style to collect; it was just the beginning of collecting Mexican . . .

EINSTEIN: . . . artifacts.

BURKHARDT: Whatever you needed there--paintings, or



sculpture, or ceramic, mostly ceramic--you could . . . .

I used to go in Guadalajara to an antique place, and he was very honest. He says this is this, and this is that. Sometimes I found a broken one which was very reasonable but good and old. And he says this is a fake or this is a fake; he says, "I wouldn't sell you that." So I got these things very reasonable during that time. I didn't buy them to sell; I bought them because I liked them. I bought crucifixions--you see several here--and they're a piece of art. My wife and I, we collected all kinds of art. We collected all kind of prints, lithographs, etchings from the masters--Picasso, Braque, Miró and all those people--at the right time, when they were reasonable, because we loved them. It's not a matter of how much is it worth. Even today, I don't care how much it's worth. It's just a matter of buying something which you live with and appreciate.

EINSTEIN: You showed me part of your collection, and I was very impressed by especially . . . .

BURKHARDT: [Käthe] Kollwitz, for example. It's conservative, but it's beautiful. It doesn't matter if it's abstract or surrealist or whatever you want to call it. If it's good, it's good. Kollwitz is very, very conservative, but it's just as great as anyone. [Edvard] Munch





was a conservative painter when everybody painted abstract, and he's certainly as great as most of them. Because he painted alive--he believed in the people he lived with, and that's what he painted.

EINSTEIN: You have a beautiful [Georges] Rouault you showed me, too.

BURKHARDT: I have several Rouaults. I gave one to the school, one of the best. And most of those things will all go to the school. That's my donation for the country. They get all my good things; they get most of our collection. That's what we can do for the country, so people can see it. I have 140 Mark Tobey's, and most of them will go to the school. Us, our collection, to give back to the people--there's nothing greater in life that you can do something for America, who has been good to me. I can give them something in return, what I did for my hard labor.

And all what I do today--I make lots of prints, so people can still buy them reasonable. When I get once more famous, they still can buy a print reasonable. And they're only small editions. And even at the small edition, every one is a little bit different. I think the artist should print his own prints, not make them through a factory. It's fine if you want to make prints through a



factory and sell them reasonable so that people can get them. But it became a big business. And [I made] all my prints, what I have, except for a few which were made by Lynton Kistler, lithographs which I made in the late forties.

EINSTEIN: Where was that?

BURKHARDT: Lynton Kistler was a man who made lithographs. I used to go there in the evening and make a stone, and he'd print it, three or five or ten or twelve.

EINSTEIN: Was that in Los Angeles?

BURKHARDT: It was in Los Angeles. He was one of the first printers where an artist could go, and the stone was there, and he'd teach you how to make a lithograph. And he made them. But then it became that everybody makes lithographs, like in a factory. And they make just--like Picasso makes just a drawing on transfer paper; they put it on the stone, and they make so many lithographs. That's one way of doing a thing, if you could buy it reasonable. Now, when they came out, they were quite reasonable, you know. But then it became big business, and of course you pay for the name.

EINSTEIN: So you prefer to do it yourself.

BURKHARDT: All the things I have. I have stacks of early things, just black and white, when I started. But now every one has to be a masterpiece. I don't give up till I



find new ways every time. So it's sometimes paint. You wouldn't know what medium it is at all, because my enjoyment--you make something that when you look at it, "Oh, that's beautiful!" Even if you don't know what it is, it's just color.

EINSTEIN: You work with linoleum prints.

BURKHARDT: Yeah, mostly.

EINSTEIN: And you have your own press right here.

BURKHARDT: My own press. And I got all the material I want. I never have to save anything. I have the best life. I'm one of the few who sold enough, worked hard enough--I have everything in the world I want. My happiness is on the printing press, with my wife, with my home and family. That's my life, and I cannot wish a better life anywhere in the world than what we have. We have a beautiful garden which I built myself. I put all the retaining walls in; I plant my own vegetables. I have the best wife in the world. I couldn't get anything better. She takes care of me, and she's intelligent, which I haven't got--that's why I'm a painter. But together you couldn't find a better life than we have.

EINSTEIN: Sounds great.

BURKHARDT: You never hear a bad word in our house. She does what she wants, I do what I want. She lets me paint;



she lets me draw--she never stops me. And I go there in the morning and make every time a new creation. Now I make my prints with acid on the linoleum; I don't even use a knife. That's something new again. And I want them they look like paintings almost. When I make an edition of six, every one is different, every one is an original.

EINSTEIN: And you do things with the inking, too.

BURKHARDT: Inking. Altogether different than a lot of people. I print wet over wet over wet till I get what I want. And that's the enjoyment I get out of life; to create something which is my own. I make Bicentennial prints, a whole stack.

EINSTEIN: You enjoy working by yourself on these prints, you've explained to me, so that you can see the whole process through and feel complete about it. Could you see collaborating with a printer if you could work out a way where you would both participate?

BURKHARDT: The printer cannot make my things because the printer is made to make a mechanical thing, you see. I start mine mechanically, but then I go further and make it a piece of art. That's my enjoyment. Because you look up my prints, and everybody says, "My God, how did he make them?" Because it's different from anybody else: it's my signature. Even if I don't sign them, the people can





see it's mine, if they know once. If a show comes up, fine. If no show comes up, I paint anyhow. I made this week--I'll show you later--some beautiful new prints, which are something altogether new again.

EINSTEIN: When did you first start working with linoleum?

BURKHARDT: About five years ago. It was [Tom] Fricano in the school who said, "So-and-so has a little printing press for sale." Five, six years ago. And I made a lot of mistakes, you know. I didn't know what ink to use and how to make it all by hand. And one day I said, "Let's get an electric press," you know, a bigger one. And then I gave the other one to a friend of mine. Then, little by little, I started to use colors. I didn't know what colors--there were too much oil in them. I didn't know, you know--I had to learn everything the hard way. First they were all black and white with a little color; now I make them mostly with color. I print over and over and over, and change and do anything with it. And every one becomes almost a painting.

EINSTEIN: It sounds like you're working a lot more with the lithograph press, lithograph prints, than paintings these days.

BURKHARDT: I have no room for paintings. Where should I put them? I just stretched a canvas--6-1/2 x 9-1/2 feet. That's a big canvas. And I had to prepare that. The Olympics



is almost over now, so I don't have to--this I wanted to see. So then I start my drawings again. I have to collect my coffin period, I have to collect all the different cigarette ads, so I can make them in color, the way they are; and I have to think and make other drawings. When I'm ready for that, then I put my main thing on first, which is burlap. I paste over that with Wilhold glue. I go to the studio, get a dirty plastic paint from the dirty buckets, and put them there in the right place. But everything is figured out, everything is drawn first. And when I make that, I'm going to make shots, photographs, like some other big paintings I made, to show how a painting is made, how much it takes before the final touches are made. And even the final touches--sometimes, one inch of a color can be right or wrong.

EINSTEIN: Now we're talking about something different, which introduces a new topic that I wanted to ask you about. A lot of your paintings are almost assemblages. They're collaged; they're three-dimensional. What stimulated that?

BURKHARDT: Well, when I was in Switzerland, for example, in the mountains there in Tessin (or Ticino) in the southern part--my sister has a cabin, way up in the mountains--the people who used to do the farming there couldn't go any further because they couldn't make a living. And you find



those old scythes laying around in the old buildings which collapsed already. And I picked some up. I made one collage called The Past. I show four scythes, just a canvas with a sun which is faded out, nothing more, and some paint on it like old rusty drippings from the scythe. And I called it The Past. It shows things which were used, and it's a thing of the past. And I used again four scythes when I made a painting against Johnson and Nixon on account of the Vietnam war. I used that with two coffins and the scythes. That's the man who gave the final order, you see, and that's what I used.

The skulls I collected for twenty years. I used to go--in Guadalajara, you could buy a skull in the morgue [if you] showed them that you are a teacher and that you used it for the sake of art, not abuse it. Same thing in San Miguel. I used to go to the mayor of the town, show him my catalog, that I'm an artist, that I'm teaching in the university, and if I can have a skull or two. And he gives me permission. He sends somebody with me to the graveyard, says, "Give him a skull or two." Or that they lay around there, they say they belong to somebody. Now the little skulls from the children--they bury children every day there, and they just throw the other ones out. They lay around, and you can pick them up like seashells.



Now it has changed, but at that time you could even have skulls, you know, you could pick up. The gravedigger knew that I'm an artist, and he respected you for that. But if somebody uses a skull for an ashtray, it's wrong. But the skulls I have are immortalized; they become a piece of art, a piece of culture.

EINSTEIN: When did you first use them in your painting?

BURKHARDT: This was the first one here, and this was painted about--when was that?

EINSTEIN: It says '67.

BURKHARDT: In '67. I make my first one when the Americans in Vietnam bombed a town by mistake and killed about 200 women and children. This is the one family of this town where I show five children, the father and mother. [Lang Vei, Vietnam]

EINSTEIN: This was quite a bit after you collected the skulls. Did you know at that time . . . ?

BURKHARDT: Yeah, I collected the skulls for a long time, hoping that I have a chance someday. And the Vietnam war, when [William] Calley shot the women and children . . . . This is my main painting in my life [My Lai (1969)]. If anything would be lost, that painting would be one of the most famous paintings in the world, like Picasso's Guernica, I condemn, especially when a man shoots women and children





which are defenseless. That's not war. And who's responsible? The president who sent him over there. That's why I buried Johnson, I buried Nixon. And that big painting, I was so excited when that happened. I made that painting, and I look at that painting, it's still a masterpiece. There is no other painting in this country which could stand up next to that one. I don't care. You take the New York School, you put that painting next to it--it will kill all the others. When you see that painting once, you never forget it for the whole life.

EINSTEIN: It's quite large. It's about . . . .

BURKHARDT: It's 6-1/2 x 9-1/2 feet. I just stretched another canvas. I got about eight paintings like that size.

EINSTEIN: Do you work quickly on something like this?

BURKHARDT: Oh, it took a long time. You know, it's not the actual painting; it's the collection: to collect the skulls, to get the ideas, to get the drawings for those paintings, you know, the preparation it takes, and then to get all that heavy stuff. I put on that plastic paint, which has to be put on so it can't come off anymore. That's put on when the canvas is on the glue side. I put Wilhold glue there, and every little plastic spot holds. You cannot take it off, not even with a hammer. It has to be technically well



done. I always use the best canvas, linen, and the stretcher bars--everything is made to last. And those paintings will last, if you take care of them.

EINSTEIN: You stretch your own canvases?

BURKHARDT: Everything. I stretch my own canvas. Everything is started from raw. I go in the lumberyard; I get the lumber; I make the frame. It looks like a house, you build the frame--beautiful put together. And then I stretched it--and it's a job to stretch a canvas like that. Then I glue-size it. And from there, I still use the white lead. I still have enough white lead left from a couple of big paintings. I put my plastic paint on it, white lead paste, like the old masters; I put white lead on. And then I go over it with white paint, with regular paint again, the regular titanium zinc, go over it with a small brush, and go over, because white lead, when it's in a dark place, becomes yellow.

Now, the painting I made on the County Museum, I didn't do that because I wanted it to get dirty, even dirtier and worse yet, to bury--that it should look like the tar pit. But you see, the County Museum made that painting; I just painted it. Because for twenty years, they didn't even know that I'm alive. They cannot complain, because when they say something, I say, "Look, you don't even know that



I'm here." They promoted all the junk. Some of them are good, but in general anybody who makes junk they collected. And the good artists they have forgotten.

EINSTEIN: So you made a tar pit painting?

BURKHARDT: So I made a large painting. I made some pits, and that's my opinion, what I think about the County Museum. And a lot of people agree with me. I say this: "It's all right to have the newest things in there, but they should have a certain group of good painters from this town which should be shown at any time." To show what happened in certain periods in Los Angeles is very important. But they don't look at that; they only put in one man's opinion, which I think is wrong.



TAPE NUMBER: II, SIDE ONE

SEPTEMBER 13, 1976

EINSTEIN: Hello, Mr. Burkhardt, once again. The last time, just as we finished, we had been talking about the Los Angeles County Museum and how you personally and other artists had felt neglected by the museum and felt that it was more or less an effort controlled by a very few people rather than a community. Now, to begin today, I'd like to ask you a bit about the show that you participated in with LAICA, the Los Angeles Institute of Contemporary Art ["Nine Senior Southern California Painters"]. That's an organization that proposes to gather community feeling and community opinion to center around its shows. Do you feel that's a solution to the problems that the County Museum presents?

BURKHARDT: Well, it has happened different now, since that first exhibition. They promote mostly the fallout, the same thing like the County Museum. The first show was the people here in Los Angeles who are the oldtimers who were in the modern movement. That was the first show. I believe I had three paintings there--which is actually not enough to show very much, but at least it gave me an opportunity to show some things I'm doing, along with





other people who work in this town for the sake of modern art. It was a really very excellent show. But somehow I feel it's a younger group who took over, and they promote mostly what is new. Now, I have no objection as long as it's good, but they should have some of the others, too--not just forget about everybody else. That's what the County Museum does. If you're thirty-five or older, you have no chance there whatsoever; they don't even look at you. Cézanne only started when he was in his late thirties. Now, that should have nothing to do with age. What a man produces, I don't care how old he is--Grandma Moses started to paint in her eighties and make beautiful paintings. How old? It has nothing to do that you have to be young. How many young people do something good which will last forever? It's very unusual that a young fellow--he picks something up, he might make an accidental good painting and get promoted by somebody who's in a particular field, and he becomes famous; but when he dies, everything dies with him.

EINSTEIN: Can you tell me how it occurred that you participated in the LAICA show?

BURKHARDT: I just was recommended. I wouldn't be surprised if Feitelson had a lot to do with it because Feitelson knew the people who really worked in this town in the early



movement of modernism. I think [it was] with the help of him, who's done more than anybody else in this town, Feitelson. If you like his paintings or not has nothing to do with what he has done. He has really done a lot for the modern painter, the good painters in this town, more than anybody else. Now, some people like his paintings; other people don't. So it is with mine, too; not everybody likes my paintings. They say, "Oh, he always paints death." I don't paint death. Well, when we come further, I will talk about those paintings.

EINSTEIN: All right. Did you get a chance to meet with the other artists in the show. I believe there were nine [Florence Arnold, Nick Brigante, Hans Burkhardt, Annita Delano, Lorser Feitelson, Peter Krasnow, Helen Lundeberg, John McLaughlin, and Emerson Woelffer].

BURKHARDT: Yes, they're all my friends, all the old-timers. Helen Lundeberg, you know I have a painting of hers. I have drawings of Feitelson, the way he makes these paintings. From most of those people I have something. We used to exchange things with all the people who lived with me in this town here.

EINSTEIN: Did you feel that anybody that should have been included in that exhibit was excluded?

BURKHARDT: Well, let's just say that it was small, so



much that you could hang. Naturally you have people which were great, but I think they had the people who were alive yet. Some of the great ones died, you see, for example, Fritz Schwaderer, not so much modern, but Fred Kahn. We had Man Ray here, you see. We had people here. But in general they wanted the people here which are still living today, which are the old-timers who promoted a certain modern art and worked hard at it and are still painting today.

EINSTEIN: Were you still teaching at that time?

BURKHARDT: Yeah.

EINSTEIN: Did you get a chance to get any reaction from your students about seeing some of the older generation, some of their work?

BURKHARDT: Well, personally, I thought it was a real good show. The students go there, look at these things. Of course, to most of the students, it's already too old-fashioned because we're a different generation. You cannot compare the generation of our people, which are born around 1900, 1910, around that time, with the people who are born fifty years later, because the world has changed and painting has changed. But at least they can appreciate a good painting when they see it. I had a lot of good comments. The painting I had there were three antiwar paintings. One



was the coffin of Nixon, who was responsible for prolonging the war [The Dead Politicians (1974)]; and two were made in memory of some of my students who gave their life in Vietnam [In Memory of a Fallen Soldier in Vietnam (1970)].

EINSTEIN: So they were all recent paintings.

BURKHARDT: They were recent paintings. And they were really painterly. All those paintings will go to the school. They belong to the people.

EINSTEIN: I see. A few minutes ago, before we started the tape, we were talking about the show that's at the San Francisco [Museum of Modern Art] at the present time, the Bicentennial show of California art ["Painting and Sculpture in California: The Modern Era"]. You mentioned that you had just been up north and visited the show and that you're represented yourself in the exhibition. Can you give me an idea about how you feel about that exhibition?

BURKHARDT: Well, I'm very thankful that they gave me the chance to show a painting. They wanted an early one. Now, the early ones represent certain periods, and I sent a very, very interesting work, very nice, a really painterly one from the movement in the early fifties, just an excellent painting [Abstraction (1953)]. But I'd love to see a late one at the same time, to see the comparison. But the show-- in general, I felt it was very difficult to select certain





groups, and I don't know how long the time was in order to select that group. I would have liked to have seen other artists in it and other people which are in it perhaps not, but this is all a personal opinion. In general, the California artists from the south are not as great as the movement in San Francisco. But the movement in San Francisco was a much later movement. You see, it was in the fifties up to date, while the Los Angeles people, there was only Feitelson and McLaughlin and a few of these which were more the hard-edge painters who were represented. They had Rico Lebrun there; they had a beautiful painting there. [Howard] Warshaw had a good early painting there. There was some real good paintings. But the movement of the real painty painting was lacking.

EINSTEIN: And what was going on in San Francisco that was lacking in Los Angeles?

BURKHARDT: They were more painterly painters. You see, the San Francisco school was a painty school.

EINSTEIN: Clyfford Still.

BURKHARDT: They put paint on it and moved the paint like the German expressionists, you see. But before that it doesn't show very much. You have Clyfford Still, the whole big group who followed Clyfford Still, who was one of the



early ones. But then they have paintings of, oh, what's the artist who makes the splatter down here? He made those empty canvases . . . .

EINSTEIN: Sam Francis.

BURKHARDT: Sam Francis. You see, if he would be shown, one or two or three would have been fine, but there's a whole room, which I think was too much. They picked certain artists which they promoted. I would have liked to see, personally, that each artist had at the most three paintings, one an early one up to 1950 or before, one around between '50 and '60, and one a late one, which I think would have made a much better show. But this is only a personal opinion. Because some paintings overpower others when there are too many, and they lose.

EINSTEIN: This show seems to have been organized around a historical idea about who influenced other artists and which periods in their own careers were more influential. Do you agree with that?

BURKHARDT: Yeah. You see, there's certain movements. For example, I was in the movement more of the abstract expressionists; that was my movement. And certain students learned from me, you know. They see my paintings, and they say, "Well, that's what I"--get an idea. Feitelson made the hard-edge, and there were a lot of people who made



hard-edge painting because Feitelson started that. Because in this particular field, Feitelson started from his figures, then he made it more abstract a little bit, and then from there he went further and further until he arrived at these last paintings.

EINSTEIN: In a progressive development.

BURKHARDT: Yeah. You see I have nothing against any artist as long he starts with something and finds his own way as far as he wants to go. But I don't like to see a man who jumps on the bandwagon because abstract is the fashion this year, next year is hard-edge, and next year is something else. It doesn't work.

But the paintings in general--they have some nice ones. They had some early California painters, although I feel some of the really good ones were not represented.

EINSTEIN: Who did you feel was missing?

BURKHARDT: Well, for example, you have a German up north who painted mostly the landscapes, the seascapes, Ritschel, who was a German expressionist painter, powerful, you see. He influenced people how to put paint on and really work. That would have been much better than the conservative ones. But then you have always a certain group of people, like Millard Sheets, and a lot of people followed that particular style, which was not a modern style. Millard Sheets was a



good draftsman, and he made some good paintings in the beginning, but it became too commercial after a while. The style has changed in the world, but he didn't go any further. Even if he tried to be modern, it was not in him. He made some modern things, but they didn't work right because his soul was not in it. You cannot change a person. Like, for example, Emil Kosa. Emil Kosa was a great painter when he was young, but he painted a certain style which was not new. He didn't give anything new to the world, nothing personal. He was a great craftsman, but you see there was Millard Sheets, Emil Kosa, and a whole group who painted like that around 1940. Between '40 and '50, they controlled everything, and mostly everyone painted like that.

EINSTEIN: How did they control things?

BURKHARDT: Well, because they were on all the juries. They accepted the paintings they liked--which is their privilege--but, you see, I was modern, and they looked at me like I was crazy. But I painted old in my business. I copied Boucher for furniture. I made imitation early American paintings just as good as the early Americans, but I made it for business, to make a living. But at the same time I painted all my abstract paintings. First of all, I made the abstractions which are in the university





now, some of them, à la Gorky. I learned how to draw, how to make an abstraction. Naturally I made them my own after a while. But they were à la Picasso and the movement at that time which was exactly like my own. But I had to learn from those people.

EINSTEIN: Would you call yourself an abstractionist?

BURKHARDT: Yeah, generally. But when I paint, some things are abstract, some things are not. Like it says in the book, some things you can express realistically; other things . . . . How can you express love, hate, all these things, realistically? Or the tears of a mother? You can make a painting so sad, the whole painting has tears.

EINSTEIN: This is a question I've been wanting to ask you. I was looking at a few of your strike paintings, and they're much more realistic than most of your other work. For instance, there's a painting called Protest, from 1946, which I think was when you were painting a series about the Hollywood studio strikes, and these are much more realistic.

BURKHARDT: Well, because it came from the early movement. You see what happened; from Gorky, when I came to California in 1936, I was on my own again. And I went to nature again and whatever interested me, you see. Then came the studio strike and the antiwar painting. They were still more a



step from realism to my style. For example, we look at that picket line, they are all painted red. It's not that because they're Communists. It's just a matter of some powerful shapes with the signs. And on the side you see the mother; the old mother sits down with a sign, says, "Why did I bring a child into the world for this?" To me it's wrong. It should be settled on the table, not in a picket line. Most of my paintings are not understood because they're not to promote the picket line; they promote the feeling that it shouldn't happen. Same in the war paintings. For example, there's a painting in that group over there, when we made the invasion: it's the mother and father praying for the son who lost his life. Now, that painting was made by a kerosene lamp, after I came home eight o'clock from my defense plant. I worked in a defense plant at that time. I came eight o'clock home, and within two hours I painted that painting when the invasion went on. You have to make it when it's the right moment because you cannot make it a few days later--the moment is gone.

EINSTEIN: We were talking a little bit earlier about the same thing. You had just finished working on a painting today, right before I came. You told me about how it had been in the thought process for a long time, but the work part took very little time.



BURKHARDT: That particular painting [Finale] I made as a protest against all those big signs which promote smoking. Now, like I say, a person has a right to smoke--that's his privilege--but don't complain when things go wrong. You know what you're doing. I don't think the signs should be there, but there is not one politician who says we shouldn't have them. You go into Beverly Hills, you don't see those signs; you only see them in Los Angeles. Let the people vote if they want those signs or not. Because to promote smoking means you promote death. It's a disgrace for any country, not only America. Other countries are the same way; they promote smoking. There's more and more women smoking today. It's the downfall of humanity because people get sick with the smog you have and the smoking together. And they are a family with children, what does it do to your family? There is not one politician who says, "It's wrong, those signs." That's why I made this painting, for example. I wanted to make this for a long time. You make a painting 6-1/2 x 9-1/2 feet. First of all you make the stretcher bar; you stretch the thing. You know what to paint. I can make lots of paintings. I know what will sell. I can make lovers, nice things. But I'm not always in the mood. When I hear the news, it's always bad. They tell you all the bad things which



happened. And that painting I made--about a month ago, I said it is finished, finished for the present time. I was thinking about that painting for a whole month. And today, within six hours, I made that painting just the way I wanted to make it. I want to make it so the feeling when you sell that cigarette pack, what it says on it, that it is dangerous to your health, should be bigger than the cigarette pack, which says, "Smoke Kool, smoke fresh." That thing is so little. I say, "Let's make it so big so the people understand what they buy."

EINSTEIN: How do you see this painting reaching the public?

BURKHARDT: Well, I don't even care. I might be dead before those paintings even are shown. But someday they will say, "Look, there was a man who had foresight." Because it's wrong. Khrushchev said, "We'll bury you." He doesn't have to bury us: we bury ourselves. All the signs, liquor, Pepsi-Cola, Coca-Cola, smoking--all these signs are mostly things which are bad for the human being. Can we have a society where this is not allowed?

EINSTEIN: You're very active in expressing your personal moral or ethical ideas. Are you as active in expressing a personal political idea? Do you have a personal political view that you put down in your paintings?

BURKHARDT: No, I just paint the way I live. If something





happens in my life . . . . For example, when I went to Mexico in 1949-50, I went to Mexico because I had the privilege to go under the GI Bill. And in Mexico, I come there, and everything is old. How can a modern painter paint anything modern? Everything is old. You have to understand the way these people live, the way they believe. You see the sad things; you see the crooked things; you see the crooked politicians; you see how badly they treat the animals. And when you make a painting, you go in the graveyard . . . . At that time the bones were lying around; if someone didn't pay the rent, the bones were thrown out of the grave. Anybody could look at the coffin, you know. Very interesting to draw, but sometimes shocking. Used to go into a morgue and draw from the dead. We used to smell from formaldehyde for days. But this is the human being. And this is the place where the Journey into the Unknown starts, because these are the earthly remains. And from this I make the journey into the better world, which is a beautiful thing. And this is Mexico to me.

EINSTEIN: Have you found a similar kind of feeling in the United States?

BURKHARDT: Well, not so much happens here. But, you see, then the Vietnam war came again. I was teaching, and the



students were there, you know. Many of them left, and I never heard anything anymore; some of them had to give their life for something which I don't believe in, and neither did the students. If the country is attacked, it's a different thing. World War II, the people volunteered. But when a man like the president can send a half a million men over there without the consent of the people and congress, this is wrong to me. I don't think we have any business over there whatsoever. And when I see what happened when the young people complained, how the police came after them, I made those paintings from the school. When they killed four students in the Middle West, I made a painting [Kent State]. I felt that, you see, that is wrong. There should have been another way to settle a thing like that; it's not necessary to take guns and shoot the people. Of course, the students got mad sometimes, too, because they were the ones who had to go and fight. The others that make money, they liked the war. So I made paintings against Vietnam more than anybody else. I made powerful paintings. I made that large painting with the skulls, which I had collected for twenty years. Now to collect all these skulls is very difficult because--today you couldn't do it anymore--you're not supposed to take a skull even from one state to the other. If you go in the



graveyard there and ask for a skull by the mayor of the town, they give you permission, and they send somebody there to give you a skull from an unknown person. Or the little ones, they used to lie around; I used to pick them up, and the caretaker knew I'd take them sometimes. But I was always good: I fed the dogs, I gave him cigarettes, I gave him liquor and all that, you know. He knew I used them for a decent purpose. But if somebody uses a skull as a cigarette ashtray, that's a disgrace. This I don't allow. But these skulls I have are in eternity something great. Because people are all beasts when it comes to war. I don't care if you're an American or a German or a Chinese--it's just wrong. And you never see a flag, in all my war paintings, never. I just say it's wrong.

But, you see, you have to make these things when it happens. Like Rico Lebrun, for example, made Buchenwald twenty years later. And it doesn't work. You make it when you're excited. Like I get somehow mad when I see all these things, and today was the time I had to make a painting. And either I make it or I don't. It should be so shocking, just as shocking as when somebody comes to the doctor, like Ed Murrow, "You have to die now because you smoked." Who's to blame? The government is to blame who allows all the cigarette ads. These are the bad people. There's so many



better things to commit--make beautiful signs of dancers and music and all that. But every sign is mostly something bad, big business, which I think is wrong.

EINSTEIN: I'm going to change the tone a bit and go back to the gift of your paintings to Northridge, to the California State University there. There's quite a few paintings there. How many?

BURKHARDT: About fifty paintings.

EINSTEIN: I went out recently and saw them there installed in the brand-new library on, I think, three stories and given a lot of nice space and light. It's very beautiful. Can you tell me how that happened?

BURKHARDT: Well, I hung them all myself. You see, I was teaching there for nine years. And for a long time I told some of the advanced people there who love art, who want to start a cultural place someday (it takes all time), if they would accept my paintings, but they cannot sell them. Because I have so many paintings which never were for sale. They belong to the people. And there's no greater honor for me if they're ever like with Munch, if they'll make a museum with all my good paintings. It will be my greatest pleasure to give something to America. I've had a good life here, and I can do something for the people. The talent I have and what I have achieved--I gave my best paintings,





which I could have sold many, many times, back to the people where they belong.

And I make crucifixions from--the first painting I made is a little one I made in 1928 of a crucifixion, and it's still a nice one; it's a very small painting. But over there are crucifixions from different periods. I made one in 1948, which is there now; it's so peaceful, the feeling, with all the world saying, "We need the Christianity of Jesus, the religion of Jesus." It shows the people they need it more than ever after the war. Then I made a painting with--like you break the neck of a flower when you pick a flower; I made that crucifixion just like you break a flower at the stem, and the flower is hanging down the neck. And I painted a new head. The leaves are in horrible colors. I worked one year on that painting, on and off, till it worked to perfection. It's one of my masterpieces I ever made.

EINSTEIN: What year was that?

BURKHARDT: In 1949-50, I painted that. I worked on two paintings like that. They're absolutely masterpieces. Why I made them, for the challenge to paint Christ, which has been painted more than anything else, paint it different which belongs to our century. Now, why did I paint it in red? To me, blood is red, and I made it in red. When I



took it to the County Museum for a show, the museum curator put it on the side. He said, "We cannot show that, that's communistic." And other paintings. They have a painting down there, One Way Road, with which I won a first prize there in 1946. It's a sunset on a battlefield. This painting is made in memory of the people who gave their life so we can live better. I was attacked, too, that it's communistic because the sun was setting. It was a movement; anything they didn't like they called communistic. They kept me always down if possible. But I painted anyhow what I believed. I made many other crucifixions. There is one there, a long one [I Alone], which is so beautiful, a feeling of--everything is abstract. I made two of these. I made these in '65. But I made other crucifixions which belong to certain periods. For example, the periods of Vietnam is altogether a different crucifixion.

EINSTEIN: It's a theme that you've worked on for what?

Twenty years or thirty years?

BURKHARDT: Yeah. But it changed all the time, and each one belonged to a certain group of painting which I made for that period. Even when you look at the crucifixion in Vietnam, it shows the Vietnam war, it shows the horror, it shows through the crucifixion how they should change for the better. And then comes Blue Horizon, the next painting,



which shows the students went already to Washington, they wanted peace. And some blue skies slowly coming in. At the end is a painting which is hope that the flowers will bloom over the ruins again [May the Flowers Bloom Again]. This is a shocking painting. But at least you see beautiful flowers come out again all over the world.\*

EINSTEIN: I'd like to talk about a few of the paintings that I remember from the library out at Northridge and get some of your thoughts and remembrances about them. There were two rather early works side by side, one called Artist and Model, and one called Still Life, I think from the mid-thirties, that had a very similar feeling. I'll start by describing them, and then you can come in. They seem to combine a kind of geometric and biomorphic kind of feeling with a lot of structure and very simple and cubist kind of matter. I was wondering--I know Gorky was doing things like that from Picasso--how did you relate to those things?

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\*Each crucifixion belongs to a certain period. Also in the Vietnam paintings is a crucifixion, altogether different from the others, implying that through the love of Christ we should change for the better, and have no more wars. This is followed by Blue Horizon, inspired by the march of the students in Washington, in protest of the war. The period is ended with a painting expressing the hope that flowers will again bloom on the ruins.



BURKHARDT: Well, you see, I learned from Gorky; and Gorky learned from Picasso, he learned from Braque, he learned from all the masters. And without knowing too much about art (I never had a chance to go to school for art; I never had an education in art), I came to Gorky's studio once when he had those abstract things on the wall. I said, "Ah, that's what I'm looking for all my life." I liked it right away.

EINSTEIN: Why did those appeal to you so readily?

BURKHARDT: Because it was something new to me. You see, Picasso wasn't famous yet. It was the movement coming up only. And I said, "I make all the old stuff, which I do pretty well. I want to make something different." And then I learned the palette, the figure. I made all these drawings. I got the [unintelligible] drawings, you know, with the help of Gorky, and then I made the paintings. That's where it started. You see, you have to start with something. Even when I look at them now, they're still pretty well made. But, you see, it was not me yet; it was still the movement of other people. So did Gorky, too: Gorky learned from Cézanne; he learned from everybody. So did I. I learned from Cézanne; I learned from Picasso. At that time I didn't even know Picasso; I didn't know anything about art, so to speak of, especially the modern movement.





I came to Gorky, and I had the feeling that I liked that particular type. And we learned how to put paint on--where you put it on thick, where to cut clean, where to be free again, just like de Kooning. You see, de Kooning and I were his top students. And we both learned how to put paint on. We were both good draftsmen. That's the most important thing: you have to learn how to draw, and then you find your own way of drawing. It's not that you have to be realistic, but it's good drawing right in the beginning. And from there on, you know, it went further and further, and all of a sudden I went to California and I changed. Then I was on my own.

EINSTEIN: There was a group of paintings at Northridge from the Second World War that dealt with the war as a theme, and I was very impressed just by one in particular from 1940 called War, which was on the bottom floor of the library, a very large painting. The way I recall it, it was almost like tormented war machinery on a battlefield, and there were some images that were almost horselike, half-machine and half-animal.

BURKHARDT: Well, it shows the destruction of one family. And it shows the tank going on the battlefield from 1918, still with all the crosses (the battle was there). And you see the children of the family come out of the battlefield;



they are dying, and they come out like ghosts in a very sombre background with mountains in the background. And it is part-realism yet, and the mother is blown to pieces on the side. The father, by that time, you see his head coming out in agony crying. When I made that painting, Picasso came out with Guernica. It had been much more abstract, and I had to change it. Then I went back to realism again. I made many drawings of it.

EINSTEIN: What did you change?

BURKHARDT: I made it more--I had to change the whole thing. It was more abstract, like my earlier ones. Then I went into it and changed the whole thing.

EINSTEIN: Did you feel it was too much like Picasso's painting?

BURKHARDT: It was too much like Picasso. It was not enough me. Now, that big painting you cannot trace to anybody. The figures all came from the school, from the life class. And some of the figures came from the newspaper I collected from World War I. It shows what happened there. I took some of the forms from that, and I put it into that painting.

EINSTEIN: There's a very strong feeling of the war machinery and the human element being intermeshed and the kind of horrible thing that happens as a result of that.



BURKHARDT: Yeah. Now, next to it you see a painting, The Liberation of Paris. The feeling that music and the dance came back to Paris again. In the center of the painting is the gaiety of a liberated Paris, with dance and music returned. But all around, instead of the Arch of Triumph, I painted the devastation of the war, in the same style as I painted the large war paintings. And on the other side (of the large painting) hangs a painting, From War to Peace. It goes from the horrible thing like a rainbow into the dance, the hope that we can live in peace again.

EINSTEIN: Scattered throughout the fifty or so paintings at Northridge are paintings from both the crucifixion series and the burial series. I want to talk a bit about the burial series in particular because there was some very striking examples. At one point you wrote--I'm going to quote--"I wanted to bring out the many differing emotions that death may bring forth." And in the series you seem to be able to do that. I mean, each painting maintained an individual kind of feeling. Can you talk a bit about the burial series?

BURKHARDT: Well, you see, most of those paintings were made a certain day, like Day of the Dead or other holidays in Mexico, which represent certain religious holidays. For example, once I went there, in the graveyard, and watched



the burials come in, and there was a jacaranda tree, that purple tree that has big seeds. I opened the seeds, and there were the most beautiful seeds in it. I made a painting the next day--the beginning of life, and there you see the end. Which is not the end of life--it's the end of the earthly remains which stays on this earth and goes back to earth so other things can grow again. After the soul has left, that's only what is left in the graveyard. To me it's just the leftover body. After the soul has left, the earthly thing doesn't mean anything anymore. That is the belief of Mexico. I used to go to Guadalajara into the graveyards. I liked that because you see the bodies laying around. It was something which was exciting to me. I didn't want to paint just landscapes, or farmers, or this or that. I made a lot of landscapes, too, but I made my creation of the landscape from the forms I found there. For example, I watched a burial, and from the back, it looked just like a big cathedral. That's where I made my cathedrals from. From the back you see the coffin on top, you see the people who carried that, and that made my structure of the cathedral.

EINSTEIN: As I remember, you also wrote that you didn't base your cathedral paintings on a specific church, but they were more your own personal architecture.

BURKHARDT: All the cathedral paintings are all my own





architecture which I took from the human shapes and from the coffins which are built up like sculpture. A friend of mine went down there, and he saw the painting Entrance into Mexico. But with this particular one he was wondering. When I came there to Mexico, he said, "Where did you find that, I cannot find this anywhere?" I said, "Look, it's only in my mind." I said, "You have the old buildings; you have the entrance into Mexico; you see a person with a coffin moving through there. This is the end of a burial, when they carry a coffin." "Ah," he says, "I see." You see, all the things I made are their own creation according to the culture. Anybody can go down there and paint the people and that; you can take photographs--the churches, too. All the things I built, White Cathedral, all those paintings--they are all made from the shapes I found in the graveyard or wherever I could find them somewhere else, wherever I could find. Even the cathedrals--I take a cathedral but I change it into my own.

EINSTEIN: There was another painting that really caught my attention that was quite different, called On the Beach (it was 1945). And there were several paintings that you did--perhaps that was another series--with these very strange kind of primeval forms on a vacant beach setting with some rocks.



BURKHARDT: I used to go every Saturday or Sunday to Santa Monica Beach and go swimming. I never missed, summer or winter. And in the school I made that type of figure, the little pinheads. I drew this from the life drawings, and I took the life drawings from the people on the beach. The rocks are not the rocks on the beach; the rocks are actually the abstractions of the figures which I actually took from the early Gorky paintings when I did the abstract. You see, I put in my own abstract. It became almost surrealism. Then I made those forms like sculpture on the beach, even with the rocks which were once rocks becoming figures, started from the figure.

EINSTEIN: Those things you called pinheads--they're very sculptural looking. Is that . . . ?

BURKHARDT: Well, it was like [Alberto] Giacometti; he made that in the sixties. See, I made these early in the thirties already. In fact, in my drawings from about 1938 on, I made these things already, the creation and simplification of my own world. You see, these are figures in my own world.

EINSTEIN: Well, I get a very primeval kind of feeling from those paintings.

BURKHARDT: I have some early ones that are still beautiful, like The Burial of the Dancer--that was the last one. I think they have it over there. It's a very somber one, a



very beautiful painting, where they carry it in, and they're all painted like sculpture. It would make the most modern sculpture in that time.

EINSTEIN: Seems like you were probably out there on the beach by yourself.

BURKHARDT: Many times I was alone and nobody went in the water. They had a fur coat on, but I used to go swimming.

EINSTEIN: Are you a member of that group that always goes into the ocean on the first day of the year?

BURKHARDT: I used to go all year. I didn't have to wait for the first. But you can get used to it when you're young, you know. It never bothered me, I used to go right in the water and swim way out. I enjoyed that, and that's where my ideas came from.

EINSTEIN: Okay, I'd like to talk about two more paintings, and maybe at the same time we could both look at this catalog from an exhibition at the Long Beach Museum of Art in 1972. The reason I've picked these two--one of them is The Burial of Gorky, from 1950; and the other one is Tropical Landscape, from 1955--there's quite a different imagery going on here. The first one is much more geometric and structured, and the second one seems to be freer, looser, more--I don't know if you would call it surreal. But maybe you could just flip back and forth between the two and just talk about it.



BURKHARDT: You see, The Burial of Gorky, who was to me my light on this earth who helped me to see and think the way I should think--now, Gorky was the genius for me, the same way like for de Kooning. He was the one who gave us the ideas and the start. When I made this of Gorky, I took the cathedrals and the burials and worked them together. The first one has a diploma; the second one had a little guiding light; the third one has a little guiding light to guide him into the better world. He has a diploma because he has succeeded as an artist. Although he was not too much known then, today he as one of the great ones is recognized. And the feeling is like they take a giant to the better world. I made, let's see, three paintings on that style.

EINSTEIN: What we have here is three sort of very strong columns, almost architectural.

BURKHARDT: They're on the side, too, you see--there is the dark one over here, you see. That means there's six people who carried that. And as for the coffin, it's already the abstract shape of a body which is going to the better world, you see. These paintings are very sculpturelike, but they're taken again from the cathedrals, which are structured. And the people, you see. So I used the cathedrals for the construction of the burial.

Now, the other one of the jungle is of something





altogether different. There you come, and everything is wild, everything goes crazy. Now this painting--it's over in the school there now--is a beautiful painting, beautiful colors, a feeling like parrots, a feeling like gaiety.

Everything is moving and pushing around. The birds are singing; the sun is shining. Everything is green.

EINSTEIN: The forms themselves are rounder, and they have much more movement to them. They're not as architectural.

BURKHARDT: There's no architecture; everything is moving. Everything is growing to go to heaven. All the trees search for the light. You see colors; you see birds, you know.

It's a feeling of something beautiful. Like sunrise. When you come there, you hear the birds, you know; they give each other signals. You see a beautiful color of flowers somewhere. It's really altogether something different. A burial is a different thing. It's an architectural thing which is again the journey that you leave this earth to go to the better world and you go to the church.

EINSTEIN: There was a painting called Gateway to Eternity in which there's forms which seem to combine the forms of this painting, Tropical Landscape, and The Burial of Gorky. In other words, there the figures themselves are formed out of these strange kind of nerve cell shapes, and those shapes are put in combination which in turn form figural kind of configurations.



BURKHARDT: Yeah, these particular paintings I made to show that they go to heaven through their religion, which is the church. You see all the people bringing the burden into the church, which they do at any time, you see. And there they will decide, more or less, if you worked, if you have been good enough to go to heaven or not. If you don't go there, you go on the side, you go back to earth, while the people who believed and were good people go to the door, which is the gateway of that church into the better world.

Now, I made some paintings, too--I don't believe there's any over there, just a small one, The Bells Ring for a Burial--Silent Sounds. This was some of the best I made in Mexico. Beautiful paintings. I went once on an early Sunday morning. When the farmers bring their dead in, they walk sometimes ten miles to bring them there. They go to the church, and there they give the last blessing. From there the soul is leaving, and the body they dump forever there--just dump, you know; they bury him. Now, in this particular, I say, "How can I make the sounds of the bells which ring for that particular man who cannot hear those sounds?" That's why the paintings are called Silent Sounds. And it's one of the most beautiful things. I took all the shapes from the leftovers in the graveyard which I found there. They come down from the top. And it was some of



my most successful paintings. But something has to happen to make a painting. If I wouldn't have heard those bells and seen the burial pass, I never would have made that painting. You have to--same like most of these artists. They painted something when it happens. You cannot go back after and say make another one. It doesn't work.

EINSTEIN: You showed me some of your sketchbooks a little while ago, so I could see where some of the forms came from, and you said very emphatically that all the forms are your own and that the forms in the paintings can all be found in the sketchbooks.

BURKHARDT: That's right. You see, in the early ones you spoke of, they were in the forms of Picasso, still my own shape, but they belong to somebody else. But all the paintings from about, I would say, the Second World War paintings, you cannot find anything in those which didn't come out of my sketchbook. Sure, they might look like somebody else. Somebody else made skulls, like that skull today. Van Gogh painted a skull smoking, a man smoking, you know. And they were very similar because certain things are the same. When you draw a skull, it's a skull. It can be Picasso; it can be Rembrandt; it can be me--it's still a skull. But I make it my own way.



TAPE NUMBER: II, SIDE TWO

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EINSTEIN: During the brief moment we stopped the tape, you mentioned you feel you're the most American painter because you take stands on issues and display your feelings through your paintings. Do you feel there are other artists doing the same sort of things?

BURKHARDT: It's possible. Ben Shahn did more or less the same thing. Yes, perhaps other painters which--it depends how good they are--express their feeling. Most everybody made one or two antiwar paintings, but they just made them because--well, they figured they cannot sell them so they didn't make anymore, perhaps. Picasso made Guernica, but that was the last one when the war was going on, and other wars he didn't go any further, you see. Goya made--I am perhaps the only one since Goya who made that many antiwar paintings. Because I say, that's wrong. I live in a life where there's nothing but war--the First World War, the second one, then Korea, then Vietnam--four big wars in my short life up to now. And I just say it's wrong; there must be other ways to settle things.

EINSTEIN: You included a group of pastels in the [CSUN] exhibition. When did you start working with pastels?





BURKHARDT: Oh, I made pastels years ago, but I made the big ones (which are 3 X 4 feet) mostly about 1960, when I came back from Mexico. I made many, many, and then from that at times I made a painting. But it doesn't work. When you make a pastel, you cannot copy it. You can start with a pastel and then don't look at a pastel anymore and go further. But with oil painting, it is altogether different. I still make the pastels every weekend. I have, oh, God knows how many of the nudes, and some of them are absolutely . . . . Some of them are abstract--there you are again--some are abstract, some are classic, some are realistic. It depends on the model. If I don't like the model, I go more to the abstract. If it's a beautiful classical figure, I make it more the classical style. There are no rules.

EINSTEIN: You mean if it's not a very pretty model, you make it abstract?

BURKHARDT: No, I mostly like the models other people do not like. I like a fat one or a skinny one, or something which has humanity, you know--not a girl who comes out of the beauty parlor; it's not my type. For example, I like even if you see an older model, all painted and all that; it shows something pitiful. When you make it, you know, you can make those paints on it, like a woman who's old and tries to be young again. There's a certain feeling



in those figures. Sometimes you have a classical girl-- beautiful the lines you make; it's hardly possible to make anything else, like you make a dancer out of it or something. But they all have to be composed with other things. Generally when you have the quick sketches, one-minute sketches, I make the quick sketches, because there's the movement. And then when you have the long pose, I rework those quick sketches and then I get something out of it. But you make a figure--when he stands there for half an hour, it's never a good pose because they cannot stay that long.

EINSTEIN: Did you work alongside your students when you were teaching?

BURKHARDT: Well, when I was teaching, I said to the students, I go from one student to the other, "If you don't want me to touch your drawing, just let me know." That's just very few, two or three only. They all were too glad when I did something on their drawing--"Oh, sign it for me." I showed them on the side, you know. Sometimes when a drawing is too bad, I worked into it, but mostly on the side I explained things, how things should be done, how you could exaggerate this and this and that, and I made some words on it. They said, "Oh, please sign it." I just marked it "H.B.," you know. And the students--I have drawings here of my students;



they are masterpieces, from the most conservative to the most modern.

EINSTEIN: How nice.

BURKHARDT: For example, if a man was sculpturally inclined, like my paintings of the burials, that's the type I showed what I did from realism to that type. And I said, "Now, it's up to you to find something; think sculptorwise. Whatever type of sculpture you intend to do, go step by step, and you can find it. And when you draw the figure, you don't want to just copy it. Make whatever style you want to make in sculpture. That's what you experience; that's the way you make your drawings." And I had some of those people succeed, and they made sculpture that were very good and that was their own.

EINSTEIN: You taught at Valley State College for nine years?

BURKHARDT: Nine years. I started in 1963 into 1964, and then I took a year off and went to Europe for one year.

EINSTEIN: To live there for a year?

BURKHARDT: We went there. We lived in Norway and in Switzerland, and I made a lot of paintings there in Switzerland, too. But it doesn't work. You cannot go to a country and just paint. You have to live there and understand the country. Just to go, it's impossible to just paint.



EINSTEIN: I believe you mentioned before that you met [Mark] Tobey during that period. Is that correct?

BURKHARDT: I met Tobey in 1966, and from that time on I went every year to see him. I was very much . . . .

EINSTEIN: Tell me how you met him.

BURKHARDT: Well, when I was in Switzerland somebody told me he doesn't want to see anybody, but during that time he did a lot of painting yet. He would have been glad to see me, but there was a gallery woman told me he doesn't want to see anybody.

EINSTEIN: He was living in Switzerland at that time?

BURKHARDT: He was living there in Basel. So I didn't see him. I didn't want to bother him. The next year, I went there, and I called him up (he was in the telephone book). I said that I'm so-and-so, I paint, and if I can make an appointment to see him. He said, "Sure, come over tonight." I went over and we made friends right away.

EINSTEIN: Why did you want to see him in particular?

BURKHARDT: Because he's a great painter. I admired him as a great painter. So I went every year over there. We were very close friends; we used to go out together. He made paintings, and he asked me questions of what I think of this and this and that. When I came there, you know, I spent quite a lot of time with him. And sometimes he says,





"Come with me." He took me upstairs in his secret rooms which are sacred to him, you know, and he had a mess; everything was messy, dirty, left around, oh, he was terrible that way. He took me there, and he says, "You got this? You got this? You got that?" I say, "No." He gave me some. Sometimes I bought thirty, forty prints and little paintings. And when he came to the price, he didn't know somehow. Sometimes I paid a lot, sometimes not. But I told him whatever I collect I will give to the school, I will give back to the American people. That's my greatest pleasure. Not to sell--I could sell them now; they're not for sale. They're going to go back to the people where they belong. When I came to the border once, there was a lady there checking my things from when I came from Europe, and I told her I had about forty-eight Mark Tobey's. She said, "Can I see some?" I showed her some. She says, "You're a smart man." She says, "Good for you. You bring at least the good Tobey's back to America again. That's very nice." So, you see, I have one of the . . . . Right now they're making catalogs of all the prints of Tobey, how many artist proof sheets are made, how many of the edition, how many before . . . . Like, I have many of the prints which are just one before the artist proof sheet; these are the ones which everybody wants because they are



the single prints. But they belong together. And little by little we have to give them to the school. But they need a place where they could show them, you see.

EINSTEIN: Were those silk screens or lithographs?

BURKHARDT: Some silk screens, some lithographs, some etchings, some are gouache. I got some of the most beautiful gouaches, which are very expensive today.

EINSTEIN: You told the story at one of our previous meetings about cleaning up his studio.

BURKHARDT: I was the only person he allowed to go in his studio and clean it. I said, "Mark, you can find nothing. Let me go . . . ." Before the studio, he had a beautiful room where he used to paint and make smaller things. The piano and everything was piled up, letters and everything, whatever he had. He never could find anything. Some things were missing, then I found them again. I said, "Mark, do me a favor. Can I clean the thing tomorrow?" He went to sleep. I could have taken anything, but there's a certain amount of honor between people. He trusted me, and I kept the trust. I found so many things. I said, "Look, here's the things you have been missing." I put everything in order. Then, at suppertime, I said, "Tomorrow, the studio." After he was sick, he couldn't work anymore, and it was absolutely impossible; you couldn't even go in there, so much, just like a



garbage can it looked. I said to Mark Tobey that Mark Ritter and I would clean the studio tomorrow, but he said, "Oh, no, no, no. He's not going in there. I shall clean it." And I went in there and put everything in order. I said, "Look, these paintings are started. Work on them." I said, "This is this, put this in a special drawer because these are the important things you have been missing and they're valuable." I found a beautiful Picasso print, and a print of Braque, and some things people gave to him in exhibitions, famous artists. He had those things, but he was careless. Anybody could have taken them. I said, "Put them in the bottom drawer. When you have somebody who wants to buy things for good money, that's what you show them. Other people, you don't show that."

EINSTEIN: Sounds like you had two different working methods. I've seen your studio. It's very, very neat.

BURKHARDT: Well, I was brought up--Gorky had the most beautiful studio anybody could have in the world. He had an oak floor that was washed and cleaned every Saturday. There wasn't one speck of paint on the floor. Where he painted was a rug, you know. I mean, there are certain things you cannot help when you work. But like today, you don't see spots on my floor, do you? Another painter with paint on the floor, like Jackson Pollock, everything is



dirty. I cannot work like that. Sure, there's things you have to clean every once in a while because it piles up; and you have to put things always away. There's nothing worse than when you have to look for something and it's all behind dirt and everything.

Tobey was terrible that way. But he was the most wonderful person you could meet. He was kind. He says, "I only need money so I can give it to other people." He was a very kind man, and he helped a lot of people. But he was a little bit bitter with Seattle. He promised to give them so much, but they've never done anything further. They said they're going to build a museum, but they never even started it.

EINSTEIN: Why was he living in Switzerland at that time?

BURKHARDT: Well, he had a show at [Galerie] Beyeler in Basel. And he liked the old city. There Beyeler had a house which belonged to some rich people. It was a beautiful house, had about fifteen rooms, big white planks for the floor, old but beautiful, you know. And he liked that. He liked the old neighborhood there. Perhaps in Seattle too many people bothered him and he wanted to make a change. So there he was more or less alone again and he could paint the way he wanted to paint. And he liked the old surrounding. Then later on he was too old, till finally





he didn't work anymore. He went to Paris. In Paris they had a thing, a strike, and they exploded something, and it hurt his eyes, it injured his eyes.

MRS. BURKHARDT: He was over here also.

BURKHARDT: He came over here. He did. Years ago he came over here. But the last few years he couldn't travel anymore--that's only the last three or four years--but before he used to come over here. He used to go to Paris; he had a show in London. He had a show at the Louvre, you know, the highest honor you can get. He showed me the ribbon with the big star, the highest honor in France. And still he didn't sell, not a painting in either one, either in Paris or in London. He had a letter from the queen of England, how beautiful the show is. But there is not one museum who bought a Tobey from those two shows. Now, later, now he's coming up. You see, now he's gone, and people see what he did. He was actually the forerunner of the New York School. But you see he never belonged to that clique because he painted small. Those people had to make a big painting. Tobey made one 3 X 4 inches sometimes, and it's just as beautiful as they made it. But you see, he never mixed with that people because that group in general--they drank alot and they were rough. Tobey was always a refined gentleman, at any time, and he never spoke bad about anybody.



That's one thing I must say about Tobey: he was always a kind, decent man. And I loved his work, because to me when you see his work--he lived in a different world, he lived in between the stars. When you look at these things that he made, it has something like the Milky Way; it has something which was out of this world.

EINSTEIN: It's very spiritual.

BURKHARDT: Very spiritual. Very beautiful.

EINSTEIN: I know very little about him. He was very involved in Oriental philosophies?

BURKHARDT: Yeah. The last time I went there, that was last year. He had an operation, and from that time on he didn't do too good. It affected his brain. The man was eighty-five, eighty-six years old, and everything was getting weaker and weaker. But he was always kind. He spoke always well, but he was too tired. He made some paintings yet. I had some money left, and I said, "Mark, give me whatever you want, and here's a certain amount of money." (I don't want to mention what it was.) He gave me a big, beautiful water-color he made about 1960. I said, "Has it got a title?" He said--just this way, he went--"People going up, up, up." You see, these are the people who go to heaven where his paintings are made. It has a certain spiritual thing in it. And when I look at that painting, it's so simple.



It's a watercolor. It's always his head there: you see his portrait. Mostly everything, when he did something, you see his portrait, you see his people; that's his world.

EINSTEIN: It sounds like he might be the kind of person that would have a hard time getting into the art world and becoming a part of the art market. Is that true?

BURKHARDT: Well, let's say this. He had a gallery in New York. But what if he would have had people like de Kooning, for example, behind him, or in more modern like [Andy] Warhol and all those people. Tobey would have made much more. But Tobey never was out for money. He just wanted money so he could give it to other people. Tobey helped a lot of people, you know, thousands of dollars he gave away.

EINSTEIN: Did he ever talk about regrets about not having recognition?

BURKHARDT: Ja, he felt a kind of bitter against the movement of modern art because he was left out somehow. Of course, being in Europe, in Basel, is not the best place. If he would have been in Paris or New York, I think he would have done better in the movement. But being in Basel, it's almost like a forgotten place. And even the museum [Kunstmuseum] in Basel or the Kunsthalle--he had a show at Beyeler gallery, a good show, two or three times; Beyeler always represented him--but neither the museum or the



Kunsthalle never gave him a show, after living there for sixteen years.

MRS. BURKHARDT: But after all, Hans, to be represented by Beyeler in itself is quite something.

BURKHARDT: Beyeler--that's the best. But Beyeler, too, doesn't know what to show sometimes. He shows the modern Americans now, which are not much, you know. But Beyeler generally had the finest exhibitions of Picasso, Braque, and all those people when they lived, Miró and all these. Beyeler was the best gallery anywhere. He had really good things. And being in that gallery gave Tobey a boost. But, you see, he lived in the wrong place. Like if you lived in Los Angeles, you could be the best master in the world--if you didn't live in New York, you wouldn't have any recognition. It's the same thing with Basel. Who the hell ever heard of Basel being an art city? The movement was not there. They copied everything. What the New York School made ten years before, fifteen years before, they copied fifteen years later.

EINSTEIN: Do you feel that's changed at all now? Does New York still act as such a center?

BURKHARDT: No. I don't know. You find a good artist here, you find another one there, you know, you can find them anywhere. Same thing in Paris. According to Felix Landau,





Paris is a dead city when it comes to art today, because there was a good movement of its certain people, and the young ones didn't come up to that movement.

MRS. BURKHARDT: New York is still the place where the big prizes are.

BURKHARDT: You see, if you can get a gallery in New York who promotes you and spends a lot of money, you can make the worst artist. Like [LeRoy] Nieman, who makes those things. It's M. Knoedler [and Co.] who handles him. He makes millions or more. And these things are absolutely not even art. You see, if you have the right dealer to push, you can be the worst artist and get rich.

EINSTEIN: Did you see that article in New West magazine about Nieman? It was by [Peter] Plagens and one other person. They wrote it together about his Olympic mural.

BURKHARDT: It's like a joke. Did he write well about it?

EINSTEIN: No. It was very, uh, ironic.

BURKHARDT: There is a cheap, commercial artist, you see. All it takes is promotion. Many people who are promoted. For example, you look at a catalog from the people who lived during the time of van Gogh and Cézanne and Gauguin and all those people; you don't find one who was famous in that particular time when all those people struggled and had a hard life. You see, it's the same thing today. It



will be the people fifty years from now who will decide who was the great one anywhere. But it takes time.

EINSTEIN: Did you find it hard to be friends with Tobey for any reason? I mean, because you were both artists, was there any competition there?

BURKHARDT: No, we understood each other right away. In fact the first time I went there I bought quite a lot of things, but he says, "You have to pay for it because, you see, I have a good name." I said, "It's not a matter of money; it's a matter of what I can get." And there's only certain things you could buy; other things you couldn't buy. He said, "That's not for sale. I made that," he used to say. MRS. BURKHARDT: Oh, that was only toward the end.

BURKHARDT: Towards the end, he used to say, "Oh, no, this is mine. I made that. You cannot get that." And it was hard to find anything. All of a sudden I'd catch him in a weak moment, and he says, "Come with me." He liked me, you know, and I told him I don't want to sell them, I wanted to preserve and wanted to give the things back to the people. So he understood, too. He says, "Look, come with me." He took this; he took that; he took this; he closed the door. He says, "Don't let anybody come in." I said, "How much for this?" "Oh," he says, "that's an expensive one." He made the price; it was not too bad. Then other things



which were not very valuable, he wanted to put a big price on them again. But in general, I did very well. What I got from him are mostly the pieces which are just one, you know, all the prints which are made before the first one. I have all these. And some of them in the catalog, I didn't even know where they are. And Mark Ritter, who's in charge now, looked for some of these things. For example, he made the head of a girl. He liked a young girl, and he made drawings and paintings of her. I got a beautiful head. And I think he made about a dozen--they're not even numbered--with brown lines. Beautiful. And Ritter says to me, "You know, I never found the drawing." I say, "I have the drawing." So you see, I have the drawing and the lithograph. Then I have a painting which he made: he's sitting in the armchair, the way he is, you know, and the girl is there in the nude, like a dream. And then you see her head, and his head is kissing the girl. Such a beautiful thing. This was Tobey. A good, soft, wonderful person. He was an angel.

MRS. BURKHARDT: Before he got sick, he told me he would like Hans to come and live with him for three months so they could paint together. I think he wanted to tone Hans down a little bit and make him more . . . .

BURKHARDT: The difference between Tobey and me--Tobey painted his religion, more or less, or his feeling out



of the world. I belong to this earth. I do things the way I want.

EINSTEIN: Sounds like a good combination. You could play off each other.

BURKHARDT: You see, two different types. I'm of the world, while he is always, "Oh, it's fine, take it easy, it's wonderful." Even if he was bitter, he never made a painting that he's bitter against something. When I feel something which is wrong, I don't care, I express my opinion. People can like it, or they can use their own opinion. I don't say they should like my paintings. I paint what I please. I just spoke to Plagens the other day, and he said, "What are you doing?" I said, "I'm painting a big antismoking painting." He says, "But the tobacco company wouldn't like that." He said, "You'll never sell it." I said, "If I wanted to sell it, they would buy it and destroy it. This would be their happiness." [laughter]

EINSTEIN: Are you friendly with other artists in Los Angeles now?

BURKHARDT: Oh, sure. Mostly everyone. Feitelson was always a friend of mine, and most of them are friends of mine. Of course, they are all getting older. Many of them died already. But I have been friends with mostly everyone. They respect me for what I am, and I respect





them for what they're doing. But most--many of them died out. They got so far and they didn't know how to go further anymore. Their paintings were not in style anymore, and they quit. There's very few who kept up all these years and kept up somehow with the movement of what's going on in the world today. Naturally, I think different than a young fellow. A young fellow has different ideas. He lives different; he paints different; he didn't go through the struggle like I did.

I still paint. And then I make prints. Everyone is different now; you don't find two prints the same anymore. Everyone is a challenge. And like I say, Tobey made things from beyond this world. My prints become almost the same thing. I take the subject from this earth. Then I change them until you see just a feeling of love. It could be a figure in the clouds almost. And this keeps me going every day. I have a good wife. She never complains. Because, from all the prints, she always gets one. Number one goes to the school; number two, or the artist proofsheets, goes to my wife. They are always signed over. So she has so many, she doesn't even know what to do with them anymore. All her drawers are full. I've got them out there in the storage place. There must be about 800 out there. Always one. That gives me pleasure. I can please my wife and she



lets me do what I want. She never interferes when I paint or when I make something.

EINSTEIN: That's wonderful.

MRS. BURKHARDT: Well, I give my honest criticism.

BURKHARDT: Sometimes it needs two people, you see. First of all, you have to know when to stop sometimes. Then I know sometimes something is not right, and it needs somebody's opinion to say, "The hell with it. I make it or destroy it." It takes guts to destroy, but when you destroy, you find something new, and your whole system changes.

For example, I make a linoleum cut now different than anybody. Nobody ever made a linoleum cut [like mine], because I don't even cut. It's actually not a linoleum cutting; it's just the medium, linoleum; I burn it with acids. And it becomes altogether something different. It becomes me. It took me five, six years to get that far. But step by step I arrived. I scratched in; I used acid. It took me that long to get what I'm doing today. Sure, somebody could pick up my way of doing the thing. But it's not the same anymore, because he starts on top. It took me five years to make that. I print wet over wet, which nobody does. And they become almost like paintings. And the revolt against the rules--you don't even need a border; sometimes it can be all over. The thing is you make them



different. When you make an edition of five, everyone is an original one. That's my pleasure. And when I see the colors I get sometimes, it's so amazing; it's like a new challenge every day.



TAPE NUMBER: III [video session]

NOVEMBER 13, 1976

BURKHARDT: These are some of the plates I made about twenty-five years ago. This is part of my house. You can see a beam, and those plates are on top of the beam. I made this when I used to finish furniture. I made a lot of early American furniture, and these are some of the plates we made for that particular period. I used to make these in the shop on the lathe. I had lots of fun making them. Then we took a knife and scratched them to make them look old like they are used. And on top of the beam used to be the air conditioning, so I had to put a board in front of it. This is a panel I painted in Cooper Union, when I used to decorate furniture. I used to make all these designs for samples to reproduce some of the furniture. (By the way, you took that very nicely. It's beautifully done, good in lighting and everything.) This happened to be made in Cooper Union in about 1931-32. I used to go there every evening and copy all the old panels. You see the beam; you see part of the corner of the house. You'll find that the house is mostly inside all wood, pine. It has a beam ceiling which is weather-beaten somehow. You can see how the beams are put together there with a piece of iron, and





below you see the wall, which is all hand-finished pine, beautifully water-stained and finished like a piece of furniture.

Now you see some of the early prints I made, early pastels and chalk drawings. This is a portrait of one of the models which I made in Hollywood evening school. That's where I used to go to get the model. And here again you see Four Dancers which are taken in Hollywood evening school from the quick sketches. And here you see again Three Figures together in beautiful colors. These are the early things which I happen to have in the house right now. That's very beautiful in color, and there's not too many left. I sold many of them through the years. Now we come to sculpture. This is a piece of sculpture which a friend of mine in the university [Bassler] made. And this is a piece of sculpture a friend of mine who lives in Santa Barbara now, Lazarevich, made. And the bird was made by an artist in San Francisco [Bruno Groth]; that's made out of bronze, a very heavy piece, a very beautiful piece.

Now we come to the fireplace, which I built when I built the house. You see a lot of petrified wood in the fireplace. On the bottom you see not an unusual piece, but you see it's just logs. It's just a fireplace where you burn some of the leftovers, some wood, some paper.



And you see the petrified wood on the side. That's petrified wood which is very interesting, which I picked up years ago in the desert in Arizona. I spent a lot of time in Mexico, and these are all some of things I picked up in Mexico. These are all stone. Some of them are supposed to be 800 to 1,000 years old, which I picked up at the right time when it was still possible to find them.

Further up there you see a bunch of figures which they generally used when they buried somebody to put in the coffin for a good-luck piece for the journey to the better world. Now these are still made today by the same family who made them 300 years ago. They're only about fifty or sixty years old, these here (these are still the nice ones), but they still make them today. There's one of my clocks. In the furniture business, I used to make a lot of clock faces. I made them look like the old ones. This is one example of a schoolhouse which I put an electric movement behind and hung it up in my house. This is a drawing [The Prizefighter] which I made in Hollywood High School from a prizefighter; it happened to be in Sao Paulo in the big international show. There you see an [Arnaldo] Pomodoro sculpture. The dog there is made by Kestenbaum. And there is another Pomodoro sculpture, in bronze, quite a beautiful piece which my wife and I bought from Felix



Landau in the first show he had in this country.

Then we come to the door. I made this door. When I used to work at Rennick's, we had a lot of rosettes and things like that in a pile, from Mexican things, and I made this door. The Christ on the door is one which is used in Mexico, by the primitive people, and they used that Christ when they were in the pilgrimage. They used that particular Christ. On the side there you see a drawing which is from my first year in the life class, a drawing I made in 1928 in the school in New York. On Forty-second Street there used to be a life class, let me see what they called it again . . . .

MRS. BURKHARDT: Grand Central School.

BURKHARDT: Grand Central School. That's right. I made this drawing under Arshile Gorky. It's almost fifty years ago that I made that drawing. In the background you see other things of Mark Tobey and so on. There you see a thing about 1940, the three figures [Figures]. That's made from the model, from the quick sketches, and composed in a more modern sculptor way. It's very nice in color. And those few things--I sold many of these, and there are some which are not for sale. This happened to be one of them which I always liked. It would make a nice piece of sculpture. Most of my drawings could be used for sculpture, and this



particular one would be a beautiful one. It would be very modern, even today. Then this one here--I made many, many charcoal drawings of the nude in this particular style. And there are not too many left. The only bad thing is I made them on cheap paper, on newsprint, which was not the best thing. But at that time I was poor and didn't have much money.

Now we're going in the dining room. See the spattered floor? The reason why I spattered the floor is because after the war it was hard to get good lumber, so I painted the floor and spattered it like the early Americans did. You see how the floor is painted brown and then spattered with different colors and varnished; and still after all these years, it's still nice today. This is a cabinet that I made, because the pipe from the sewer pipe up to the roof was in that corner; I had to hide it, so I had to build a cabinet in front of it. And this particular cabinet I made in one day. I cut it out in the morning, and in the afternoon I painted it and finished it--in one day. The cabinet is a dark brown, quite old and antique-looking. There's a crucifixion from Mexico. It looks very nice with the wood. This is one of the paintings I made. I used to decorate furniture. In order to decorate furniture, you had to know the periods, and I used to copy the old





primitive paintings. This particular painting is a copy of one which is in the Metropolitan Museum in New York, but I copied it from a card. I had made copies of several early American still lifes for a woman, and she said she would like a figure. But then she said the little girl was too fat, so she didn't want her. So I'm glad that she didn't take it; it's one of the few things I have left from that period. And here we come to a cabinet I made after my wife came back from Europe. She bought a lot of nice crystal pieces, like glasses and other things, and so I made this cabinet for my wife. This is a Mexican thing and some other things that my wife treasures very much, so I had to make a cabinet so everybody can see it. On the right side there, you see a Christ's head which I bought in Mexico in Guadalajara. I think it's a very, very nice interesting head. It's most likely a head from a figure which used to have clothes and then the head was just put on. It's made out of papier-mâché first and then painted. And behind it is plaster. It's very beautifully made. There you see a piece of antique I made which is a little bracket with some Mexican crucifixion on it. It looks quite nice with the wall. The wall is all big hand-finished boards about 18 inches wide. There is a chair which came from my family, from Switzerland, which is about 100 years old. It's a



walnut chair, a very nice one, very simple. And on the side there you see a panel I painted in Cooper Union years ago, which still is nice to have around. It reminds me of my younger days. There you have a board which they use in Switzerland when they beat flax. They used to hit a board with nails in it to get the threads. There you see another door I made, and a Mexican Christ which hangs on it, which makes quite a nice corner. Around the corner you see a little bracket there and some panels I made for decoration, too. [videocorder turned off]

Whenever I come to my studio, I look first at my friends. For example, here is Arshile Gorky, about 1934 (this picture was taken when he worked for the WPA). Here is his tombstone: when he was forty-four years old, he committed suicide. He was about eighteen years old when he came to this country. The second picture--that's my sister and myself when I was about six months old (I was pretty fat then). [laughter] The second one here is my friend Mark Tobey, made about 1975 (that's the last picture I took of him). This is Tamayo with my wife and myself and some people we met in the gallery in Palm Springs. This is a picture of a Orozco, whom I didn't meet. There is Rivera and Lloyd Wright. Here I'm with my friend de Kooning (we were students together with Arshile Gorky, and this



photograph was made in his studio). Here is a picture of myself and--oh, I even forgot the name--Raphael Soyer, when he came to California.

EINSTEIN: You've begun to tell me how you built the studio.

BURKHARDT: Well, in 1954, I bought a lot next to my house. The hill went right down, so I had to dig out. For about two years I dug the dirt out and filled in, in front of my house. Then I finally made my plan for the studio. I built a big retaining wall, and in about two years I had a studio for the first time in my life. Before that I painted in my living room, and it looked just like a studio. Then when I got married, my wife naturally wanted a living room, so I was glad to have a studio.

These are some of the things which are in the studio now, not permanent but just more or less for this show. This was an early abstraction [Abstraction]. There you see a piece of wood which I got from the High Sierra. You see a mountain sheep head which came from the High Sierra. The mask came from Mexico. There's a mask back there, too. This is a sculpture by Gebhardt. Here you see some early paintings. About 1939 I made an abstract flower piece [Flowers]; it was painted quite heavily and thick in paint. This particular painting, you see, there is an abstract woman [Seated Woman]. This is the first abstraction I ever



painted, in 1933. I learned from Arshile Gorky, and we learned from Braque and Picasso, which happened to be the period during that time. There you see an abstract woman which I made in 1939, taken from a sketch in the life class [Sando]. It's quite a nice painting. This particular painting is the factory I used to work in in Europe when I was about eighteen or nineteen years old--Sando was the name--and you can see the factories that burned coal at that time. That was the beginning of smog. It was quite a nice painting. This particular painting is a self-portrait of mine [Self-Portrait]. It's beautiful, in color, about 1964.

EINSTEIN: It's a very expressive kind of color. Too bad we can't see it in color.

BURKHARDT: It's beautiful in color. It's too bad we cannot see it in color. It's a very nice one. There you see the sculpture again. There is a piece of wood, it's hard to see there. This is taken from Switzerland, way up in the mountains. It happened to be part of a scythe very primitively made. When they quit farming in the mountains the farmers went in the factories to work, and they left all those things there to rot. This is a piece of sculpture a friend of mine made while working at Lockheed. And it's very interesting. He just made it





as a joke. Today it would be very modern. This happened to be a churn for making butter. It's another piece of sculpture which would perhaps be modern today. Make a beautiful piece, if it would be enlarged. But there you see, nature has mostly everything when you look for it.

There is a painting I made during the Vietnam war [Two Souls in Eternity]. It's very thick in paint.

EINSTEIN: The paint looks about an inch thick.

BURKHARDT: It's about an inch thick in some places. It's actually the plastic paint which I got out of the studio from the dirty buckets at NBC. It shows two skulls; it shows two people together in eternity (even if they're only skulls on earth) with the feeling that they belong to each other. You can see this. It's absolutely thick paint. And in fact I made many, many paintings during the period with the thick paint. I still make them today. It gives it a certain, almost a sculptural, dimension.

EINSTEIN: I notice there's other paintings we're going to talk about later, where you actually apply skulls to the surface, and in another corner of your studio there are some animal skulls which you've collected at various points.

BURKHARDT: Yeah, I collected mostly anything I could find. There you see a skull on the wall, and you see that piece of wood which I call The Wedding (you see male and female



in the same piece of wood). If you look for it, you find everything in nature. There is a mountain sheep from the High Sierra, which a friend of mine gave me. And there you find another piece of sculpture. There is a skull from a sheep, which I picked up in Norway. And back there is a gravestone from 1813 which I picked up in Norway.

EINSTEIN: Let's move around to another corner of your studio and look at some other paintings that you have here.

BURKHARDT: Well, this is a period after the war. In 1945 I made the happy paintings of dancers, and you can see the forms are all taken from the life class. I created my own forms in the forties, and these are some of the forms. You can see them in those paintings.

EINSTEIN: They're very distinctive, and I see the same kind of imagery in a lot of your work of a lot of different periods. When did this particular kind of form evolve?

BURKHARDT: I made these in the forties. This one was made 1945. Right after the war, I made very happy paintings--a feeling that we have peace again.

EINSTEIN: They are very three-dimensional kinds of figures. Did you ever do any sculptures?

BURKHARDT: No. This painting I made would make the most beautiful piece of sculpture, and it's all taken from the life class. You see, I'm more or less like Picasso: I



make something realistic and then I rework it into the abstract as far as I can go. For example, this one is the last one of the dancers. It's The Burial of the Dancer. You see the dancers here, here you see a light, here is the dancer who died, and these are the mourners. This was the last of the dancer series.

After this, I went to Mexico to paint under the GI Bill. I was very happy because I was one of the few people who really took advantage of the benefit to go to Mexico under the GI Bill. This is what, for example, I painted. This is called Christ in the City. Christ is watching over everything here. That's a pilgrim; this is the crucifixion; these are the towers of the church. It's a feeling that the church is watching over the people. And this is one of the paintings.

EINSTEIN: That was something you did in Mexico?

BURKHARDT: This I painted in Mexico. There is one more. This particular painting I made when we dropped the atom bomb [The Atom Bomb]. It shows here a shimmer; it shows the father, the mother, and the children. And it shows the destruction by the atom bomb.

EINSTEIN: There are a number of these paintings probably from this series that I saw at Northridge. A very large one called War, I believe.



BURKHARDT: I gave fifty of my best paintings to Northridge. These are paintings which came back from the top shows in the country, and I want to give those paintings to the people. I gave them all those paintings. Some of these in the studio will go over there later on, when they have more room, because these paintings are not for sale. They belong to the people. It's not a happy painting, but it's just history, what happened. Like Goya painted things to show a certain history of the world in paintings, so I do the same thing. I painted what I believed in. All my war paintings are against war. There is never a nationality. I just say, "War is wrong. It should be settled in a different way."

EINSTEIN: Moving over to this big painting on the side of your studio, in the same vein, a very large painting you did. Let's talk about this one over here.

BURKHARDT: All right. This particular painting I painted about ten years ago [The Burial of my Enemies]. This is the burial ground of my enemies. You see the coffins, you see the skulls; and like Michelangelo buried his enemies, I buried mine. Not actually, but just in my painting. For example, here you have a wooden skull with a Band-Aid on it. It's too bad you don't see the other one below, a skull which happened to be an autopsy. On top there you see a little skull. And there you see part of an old shirt and





a skull which represents a big dealer in New York who used to be a shirtmaker. Gorky said once, "He is a shirtmaker and always will be a shirtmaker." Gorky wanted to say that he's just a businessman, and does not care what he sells. So you see a painting. Sometimes you have to express your opinion. You find out that your enemies--or of many of the good artists--are the museum directors who do not respect certain art and are afraid, perhaps, even to show it because it may be not popular. I never make a painting to sell anyhow.

There is an antismoking painting again [Small Print].

EINSTEIN: Let's move over to the far corner of your studio where you have a print workshop set up.

BURKHARDT: This is my printing press. I can make a print. The paper is 27 inches wide. So I do my prints, and I make many, many different types of prints. I make the prints for the simple reason that I feel an artist should make his own prints and make only small editions. It's not a matter of making money; it's a matter of enjoying yourself every day and finding something new. These are some of the plates for the linoleum cuts, you see. For example, on this one you see the design here. First I take ink and draw my sketch, then I take glue and go over it, withhold glue, and make the design. The glue is colorless. But you might see



it when it shines a little bit. And the glue is the raised part. The background is burned with acid, which eats into the linoleum to give it a different texture. And this is the print. This is one of the politicians who raised my taxes [The Politicians], and it gives me great pleasure to bury them. Here are a few more. On this particular one [Dancers] we see two dancers, very, very abstract. But look how interesting the plate is.

EINSTEIN: And there you can see the texture.

BURKHARDT: Here you see the texture. The shiny part is the raised part. There's nothing cut out by hand. It's all made with glue and acid here again. You see, the holes in it are made with acid--first a design, and then the glue again. It's a very, very interesting original print which nobody ever did before. But it's not important how you make it. The important thing is that they have to be good designs. If you know how to draw, you can do anything. There are some of the Bicentennial prints, the happy prints, the way I like to see America [America, the Beautiful]: you see boats, you see happiness, you see sculpture, and they are very, very beautiful in color. They are very small editions: six or ten at the most, some of them even less.

EINSTEIN: It's too bad we can't see the colors. The colors are very, very bright.



BURKHARDT: The colors are beautiful. Here again, a mobile on top of a roof against a sky with clouds and the sun shining. Beautiful America, the way I like to see it. Sculpturelike. Again here, you see an evening with sailboats, in the sunset. Here again is a sculpturelike print in the evening, could be put on a roof as a mobile in the American colors. It would make a beautiful piece of sculpture.

EINSTEIN: You have many, many prints. How many do you do a week?

BURKHARDT: It depends. Last year, I think I spent about \$3,000 on paper alone in one year. These are again two dancers, two abstract dancers [Abstract Dancers]. You can see the background. In this particular period there is no acid; they are just scratched into the background. Let's see what this is. There is another one somewhere.

EINSTEIN: A little while ago you were showing me the museum series you did.

BURKHARDT: Oh, yes. I feel the County Museum is being destroyed by the people who run it. So I made a large painting of it [Destruction of LACMA]. It's behind this one here in my studio, and I made some prints. Now, this is the first print of the County Museum. You see the top of the County Museum, and the flag is half-mast. And you



see the destruction. There are only eight prints made.

EINSTEIN: You worked all on the same plate?

BURKHARDT: The same plate. You see, you cannot go back anymore. I made the first print. Then I cut more out. That's the second print. From the second print, I went to the third one and cut more out. More self-destruction. And then comes one more. This one is the last one in black and white. That's almost total destruction. And the last print is in color. Too bad you cannot see the color. This is in color. That's the final print. But I made forty of these because I think there are enough people who agree with me, who would like to have a print like that. It gave me great pleasure. And if they complain, it is too bad. So, I just bury them. And maybe the large painting I have of this will be a very famous painting some day. And a lot of people agree with me, when they see all the junk they have bought. Someday they will find out that a fellow was living in Los Angeles by the name of Burkhardt. Now they don't even know that I'm here. And they don't care either. Neither do I care about them.

EINSTEIN: Let's look at a few more examples of your prints before we finish up here.

BURKHARDT: This one is an abstract figure. These are abstract dancers. You have seen the plate of this, this





is the print--beautiful in color, very rich. There's another print. On this one I didn't use any acid. It's just cut out and glued and scratched into the background. Here you see this shines a little bit because it's printed about seven or eight times over each other--color over color. So some of these things are very, very rich. This is another print, of which you have seen the plate before. You can see how the acid made a big hole in the line and left the surface of the print in the light color.

This is one of my last paintings. People say, "Why do you paint a picture like that? I don't like that picture." If the people would like the picture, there would be something wrong with it. I object to the way the cigarette people advertise cigarette smoking on all the billboards. Every magazine is full of prints: "Smoke, smoke, smoke," with beautiful, sexy women and men smoking. And then they come to me and ask me for cancer fund donations to help the people. If they know that what they're doing is harmful, there is no hope for some of those people. Especially today. More and more women smoke. Why? Because it's style. And I think it's the wrong thing to do. That's why I made a painting which is against all of the big billboards that are all over the city, with a warning about the danger of smoking in very small print.



They should put this one up and call it The Small Print.

EINSTEIN: It's billboard-size almost.

BURKHARDT: It's 6-1/2 x 9-1/2 feet. You see the cigarette packs all over in strong colors, painted over dirty. The painting tells you that cigarette smoking is dangerous to your health. Every cigarette package sold has on it, in very small print, a statement that smoking may be dangerous to your health. That is why I call the painting The Small Print. You see a skull here; you see one there; you see one there; you see part of some kind of kidney. You see part of the operation here, when they cut one open and they find it's cancer.

EINSTEIN: Are those cigarette butts in there?

BURKHARDT: These are the actual cigarette butts here. Here you see the cigarette butts, which is all that's left after the smoker died. It shows a revolt against the advertising. If people want to smoke, it's their privilege. But I do not like it. When you go in the city, all you see is billboards advertising smoke and drink. They'll give you a flu shot because they want to save the people; on the other side, they kill the people, because it's big business. That's what I'm against. And the painting is a protest against all those advertisements they use in the magazines and the



billboards. The kids see them all over, and the women see them; they say, "Oh, I want to be something. I'll smoke like that man smokes." And when you have a child, your smoking is very bad for it. I made years ago a certain amount of paintings because my best friends died from smoking, and now I made this large painting, which I call The Small Print. They should make the small print big and the big print small. It would be much better that way. They should make a big poster like that. I wish some people would take this thing and make a big bulletin board and hang it up next to the others and call it The Small Print.

EINSTEIN: Now it's on the record--it's on videotape--so maybe somebody will.

BURKHARDT: That would be very nice.

EINSTEIN: Thank you very much.

BURKHARDT: You're welcome.



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